

FRITZ LEIBER • SPIDER ROBINSON

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SCIENCE FICTION
AND FANTASY

**GORDON R.
DICKSON**
MONAD GESTALT





Cosmos

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FRITZ LEIBER

RIME ISLE

CONCLUSION

The climax of the great new sword and sorcery novel, in which Fahrd and the Gray Mouser discover that the gods are dangerous allies.





SUMMARY OF RIME ISLE, PART 1

Fahfrd and the Gray Mouser, after battling a horde of vicious Sea Mingsols and saving Rime Isle, arrive at the island kingdom to find that the councillors who rule the land know nothing of the battle and are quite suspicious of the battered band of adventurers. "Shameless ingratitude!" says the Mouser.

For the beautiful Councilwomen, the ladies Cif and Afreyt, approached the heroes in Lankhmar and paid them to undertake their journey far north to Rime Isle — and now refuse to acknowledge this in public. Yet secret messages are passed arranging meetings between Cif and the Mouser and Afreyt and Fahfrd, at which a complex situation is revealed. Two gods from another world, Odin and Loki, have appeared on the godless Rime Isle and Afreyt and Cif have been chosen as their representatives. Afreyt and Cif plan to use the powers of these weakened and controllable gods to defend Rime Isle from the evil plots of the Demon Khakhht, who controls the Sea-Mingsols and plans to begin a career of chaos with the domination of Rime Isle. Afreyt and Cif cannot explain the mysteries of Odin and Loki to the godless businessmen of the Rime Isle council — their own political position is fragile — so Rime Isle must be saved in secret.

Two attacks are launched by Khakhht, one on the far end of the island, where Fahfrd must go to defend the villages with Odin and the other a sea attack on the capital, which the Mouser, with the help of Loki, must fend off, using a magical golden cube to control the great whirlpool off Rime Isle. Unfortunately the cube is one of the treasures of Rime Isle and must be stolen by Cif from the council treasury. The councilmen, observing mysterious carryings-on, become suspicious. And the gods, Loki and Odin, gain strength from their active part in these affairs. Matters are coming to a head when the Mouser returns from a scouting voyage. Cif and Afreyt have been arrested by the council and asked to account for the missing treasure.

Yet the Mouser, accompanied by the two whores, Hlisa and Rill, who carry the living flame in which Loki resides, proceed confidently from the docks to the council hall for a showdown.

And linking arms with Hilsa and Rill be set out briskly, telling himself that in reverses of fortune such as this, the all-important thing was to behave with vast self-confidence, flame like Rill's torch with it! That was the secret. What matter that he hadn't the faintest idea of what tale he would tell the council? Only maintain the appearance of self-confidence and at the moment when needed, inspiration would come!

What with the late arrival of the fishing fleet the narrow streets were quite crowded as they footed it along. Perhaps it was market night as well, and maybe the council meeting had something to do with it. At any rate there were a lot of "foreigners" out and Rime Islers too, and for a wonder the latter looked stranger and more drolly grotesque than the former. Here came trudging those four fishers again with their monstrous burdens! A fat boy gaped at them. The Mouser patted his head in passing. Oh, what a show was life!

Hilsa and Rill, infected by the Mouser's lightheartedness, put on their smiles again. He must be a grand sight, he thought, strolling along with two fine whores as if he owned the town.

The blue front of the council hall appeared, its door framed by some gone galleon's massive stern and flanked by two gum louts with quarterstaves. The Mouser felt Hilsa and Rill hesitate, but crying in a loud voice, "All honor to the council!" he swept them inside with him, Ouph and Mikkidu ducking in after.

The room inside was larger and somewhat more lofty than the one at the Salt Herring, but was gray-timbered like it, hault of wrecks. And it had no fireplace, but was inadequately warmed by two smoking braziers and lit by torches that burned blue and sad (perhaps there were bronze nails in them), not merrily golden-yellow like Rill's. The main article of furniture was a long heavy table, at one end of which Cif and Afreyt sat, looking their haughtiest, while drawn away from them toward the other end were seated ten large sober Isle-men of middle years, Groniger in their midst, with such doleful, gloomily indignant, outraged looks on their faces that the Mouser burst out laughing. Other Islers crowded the walls, some women among them. All turned on the newcomers faces of mingled puzzlement and disapproval.

Groniger reared up and thundered at him, "You dare to laugh at the gathered authority of Rime Isle? You, who come hurrying in accompanied by women of the streets and your own trespassing crewmen?"

The Mouser managed to control his laughter and listen with the most open, honest expression imaginable, injured innocence incarnate.

Groniger went on, shaking his finger at the other, "Well, there he stands, councillors, a chief receiver of the misappropriated gold, perchance even of the gold cube of honest-dealing. The man who came to us out of the south with tales of magic storms and day turned night and vanished hostile vessels and a purported Mingol invasion—he who has, as you perceive, Mingols amongst his crew—the man who paid for his dockage in Rime Isle gold!"

Cif stood up at that, her eyes blazing, and said, "Let him speak, at least, and answer this outrageous charge, since you won't take my word."

A councillor rose beside Groniger. "Why should we listen to a stranger's lies?"

Groniger said, "I thank you, Dwone." Afreyt got to her feet. "No, let him speak. Will you hear nothing hut your own voices?"

Another councillor got up.

Groniger said, "Yes, Zwaaken!"

That one said, "No harm to hear what he has to say. He may convict himself out of his own mouth."

Cif glared at Zwaaken and said loudly, "Tell them, Mouser!"

At that moment the Mouser, glancing at Rill's torch (which seemed to wink at him) felt a godlike power invading and possessing him to the tips of his fingers and toes—nay, to the end of his every hair. Without warning—in fact, without knowing he was going to do it at all—he ran forward across the room and sprang atop the table where its sides were clear toward Cif's end.

He looked around compellingly at all (a sea of cold and hostile faces, mostly), gave them a searching stare, and then—well, as the godlike power possessed every part of him utterly, his mind was perforce driven completely out of himself, the scene swiftly darkened, he heard himself beginning to say something in a mighty voice, but then he (his mind) fell irretrievably into an inner darkness deeper and blacker than any sleep or swoon.

Then (for the Mouser) no time at all

passed... or an eternity.

His return to awareness (or rebirth, rather—it seemed that massive a transition) began with whirling yellow lights and grinning, open-mouthed, exalted faces motting the inner darkness, and the sense of a great noise on the edge of the audible and of a resonant voice speaking words of power, and then without other warning the whole bright and deafening scene materialized with a rush and a roar and he was standing insolently tall on the massive council table with what felt like a wild (or even demented) smile on his lips, while his left fist rested jauntily on his hip and his right was whirling around his head the golden queller (or cube of square-dealing, he reminded himself) on its cord. And all around him every last Rimelander—councillors, guards, common fishers, women (and Cif, Afreyt, Rill, Hilsa, Mikkidu, needless to say)—was staring at him with rapturous adoration (as if he were a god or legendary hero at least) and standing on their feet (some jumping up and down) and cheering him to the echo! Fists pounded the table, quarterstaves thudded the stony floor resoundingly. While torchmen whirled their sad flambeaux until they flamed as yellow-bright as Rill's.

Now in the name of all the gods at once, the Mouser asked himself, continuing however to grin, *wherever* did I tell or promise them to put them all in such a state? In the fiend's name, what?

Groniger swiftly mounted the other end of the table, hoisted by those beside him, waved for silence, and as soon as he'd got a little of that comradery assured the Mouser in a great feelingful voice, advancing to make himself heard, "We'll do it—oh, we'll do it! I myself will lead out the Rime contingent, half our armed citizenry, across the Deathlands to Fafhrd's aid against the Widdershins, while Dwone and Zwaaken will man the armed fishing fleet with the other half and follow you in *Flotsam* against the Sunwise Mingols. Victory!"

And with that the hall resounded with cries of "Death to the Mingols!" "Victory!" and other cheers the Mouser couldn't quite make out. As the noise passed its peak, Groniger shouted, "Wine! Let's pledge our allegiance!" while Zwaaken cried to the Mouser, "Summon your crewmen to celebrate with us—they've the freedom of Rime Isle now and forever!" (Mikkidu was soon dispatched.)

The Mouser looked helplessly at Cif—though still maintaining his grin (by now he must look quite glassy-eyed, he thought)—but she only stretched her hand toward him, crying, flush-checked, “I’ll sail with you!” while Afreyt beside her proclaimed, “I’ll go ahead across the Deathlands to join Fafhrd, hringing god Odin with me!”

Groniger heard that and called to her, “I and my men will give you whatever help with that you need, honored council-lady,” which told the Mouser that besides all else, he’d got the atheistical fishermen believing in gods—Odin and Loki, at any rate. *What* had he told them?

He let Cif and Afreyt draw him down, but before he could begin to question them, Cif had thrown her arms around him, hugged him tight, and was kissing him full on the lips. This was wonderful, something he’d been dreaming of for three months and more (even though he’d pictured it happening in somewhat more private circumstances) and when she at last drew back, starry-eyed, it was another sort of question he was of a mind to ask her, but at that moment tall Afreyt grabbed him and soon was kissing him as soundly.

This was undeniably pleasant, but it took away from Cif’s kiss, made it less personal, more a sign of congratulations and expression of overflowing enthusiasm than a mark of special affection. His Cif-dream faded down. And when Afreyt was done with him, he was at once surrounded by a press of well-wishers, some of whom wanted to embrace him

also. From the corner of his eye he noted Hilin and Rill hussling all and sundry—really, all these kisses had no meaning at all, including Cif’s of course; he’d been a fool to think differently—and at one point he could have sworn he saw Groniger dancing a jig. Only old Ourph, for some reason, did not join in the merriment. Once he caught the old Mingol looking at him sadly.

And so the celebration began that lasted half the night and involved much drinking and eating and impromptu cheering and dancing and parading round and about and in and out. And the longer it went on, the more grotesque the cavorting and footstamping marches got, and all of it to the rhythm of the vindictive little rhyme that still went on resounding deep in the Mouser’s mind, the tune to which everything was beginning to dance: “Storm clouds thicken round Rime Isle.

Nature hews her blackest hile. Monsters quicken, nightmarer foal, niss and nicor, dew and troll. Those lines in particular seemed to the Mouser to describe what was happening just now—a hirth of monsters. (But where were the trolls?) And so on (the rhyme) until its doomful and monstrously compelling end: “Mingols to their deaths must go, down to weedy hell below, never draw an easy breath, suffer an unending death, everlasting pain and strife, everlasting death in life. Mingol madness ever burn! Never pass again return!”

And through it all the Mouser maintained his perhaps glassy-eyed smile and jaunty, insolent air of supreme self-

confidence; he answered one repeated question with, “No, I’m no orator—never had any training—though I’ve always liked to talk,” but inwardly he seethed with curiosity. As soon as he got a chance, he asked Cif, “Whatever did I say to bring them around, to change their minds so utterly?”

“Why, you should know,” she told him.

“But tell me in your own words,” he said.

She deliberated. “You appealed entirely to their feelings, to their emotions,” she said at last, simply. “It was wonderful.”

“Yes, but what exactly did I say? What were my words?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you *that*,” she protested. “It was so all of a piece that no one thing stood out—I’ve quite forgotten the details. Content you, it was perfect.”

Later on he ventured to inquire of Groniger, “At what point did my arguments begin to persuade you?”

“How can you ask that?” the grizzled Rimelander rejoined, a frown of honest puzzlement rejoining his brow. “It was all so supremely logical, clearly and coldly reasoned. Like two and two makes four. How can one point to one part of arithmetic as being more compelling than another?”

“True, true,” the Mouser echoed reluctantly, and ventured to add, “I suppose it was the same sort of rigorism logic that persuaded you to accept the gods Odin and Loki?”

“Precisely,” Groniger confirmed.

The Mouser nodded, though he shrugged his lips. Oh, he knew what had happened all right; he even checked it out a little later with Rill.

“Where did you light your torch?” he asked.

“At the god’s fire, of course,” she answered. “At the god’s fire in the Flame Den.” And then she kissed him. (She wasn’t too bad at that either, even though there was nothing to the whole kissing business.)

Yes, he knew that the god Loki had come out of the flames and possessed him for a while (as Fafhrd had perhaps once been possessed by the god Isack back in Lankmar) and spoken through his lips the sort of arguments that are so convincing when voiced by a god or delivered in time of war or comparable crisis—and so empty when proclaimed by a mere mortal on any ordinary occasion.

And really there was no time for speculation about the mystery of what he’d said, now that there was so much to be done, so many life-and-death decisions to be made, so many eventful trains of action to be guided to their conclusions—once these folk had got through celebrating and taken a little rest.

Still, it would be nice to know just a little of what he’d actually said, he thought wistfully. Some of it might even have been clever. Why in heaven’s name, for instance, and to illustrate what, had he taken the squaller out of his pouch and whirled it around his head?

He had to admit it was rather pleasant being possessed by a god (or would he if

one could remember any of it) but it did leave one feeling empty, that is, except for the ever present Mingols-to-their-deaths jingle—that he’d never get shut of, it seemed.



Next morning Fafhrd’s hand got their first sight of Cold Harbor, the sea, and the entire Mingol advance force all at once, as sun and west wind dissipated the coastal fog and blew it from the glacier, on the edge of which they were now all making their way. It was a much smaller and vastly more primitive settlement than Salthaven. To the north rose the dark crater-summit of Mount Helglow, so lofty and near that its eastern foothills still cast their shadows on the ice. A wisp of smoke rose from it, trailing off east. At the snowline a shadow on the dark rock seemed to mark the mouth of a cavern leading into the mountain’s heart. Its lower slopes were thickly crusted with snow, leading back to the glacier which, narrow at this point, stretched ahead of them north to the glittering gray sea, surprisingly near. From the glacier’s foot-





very-lofty foot, rolling grassy turf with occasional clumps of small northern cedars deformed by the wind stretched off to the southwest and its own now-distant snowy heights, wisps of white fog blowing eastways and vanishing across the rolling sunlit land between.

Glimpses of a few devastated and deserted hill farms late yesterday and early this morning, while they'd been trailing and chivying the retreating Mingol marauders, had prepared them for what they saw now. Those farm-houses and byres had been of turf or sod solely, with grass and flowers growing on their narrow roofs, smokeholes instead of chimneys. Mara, dry-eyed, pointed out the one she'd dwelt in. Cold Harbor was simply a dozen such dwellings atop a rather steep hill or large mound backed against the glacier and turf-walled—a sort of retreat for the country-dwellers in times of peril. A short distance beyond it, a sandy beach fronted the harbor itself and on it three Mingol galleys had been drawn ashore, identified by the fantastic horse cages that were the above-deck portion of their prows.

Ranged round the mound of Cold Harbor at a fairly respectful distance were some fourscore Mingols, their leaders seemingly in conference with those of the twoscore who'd gone raiding ahead and but now returned. One of these latter was pointing back toward the Deathlands and then up at the glacier, as if describing the force that had pursued them. Beyond them the three Steppes-tallions free from their cages were cropping turf. A peaceful scene, yet even as Fafhrd watched, keeping his band mostly hid (he hoped) by a fold in the ice (he did not trust too far Mingol aversion to ice) a spear came arching out of the tranquil-seeming mound and (it was a prodigious cast) struck down a Mingol. There were angry cries and a dozen Mingols returned arrow fire. Fafhrd judged that the besiegers, now reinforced, would surely try soon a determined assault. Without hesitation he gave orders.

"Skullik, here's action for you. Take your best bowman, oil, and a firepot. Race ahead for your life to where the glacier is nearest their beached ships and drop fire arrows in them, or attempt to. Run!

"Mara, follow them as far as the mound and when you see the ships smoke, but not before, run down and join your friends if the way is clear. Carefull—

Afrefy will have my head if aught befalls you. Tell them the truth about our numbers. Tell them to hold out and to feint a sortie if they see good chance.

"Mannimark! Keep one man of your squad and maintain watch here. Warn us of Mingol advances.

"Skor and the rest, follow me. We'll descend in their rear and briefly counter-feit a pursuing army. Come!"

And he was off at a run with eight berserks lumbering after, arrow-quivers banging against their backs. He'd already picked the stand of stunted cedars from the cover of which he planned to make his demonstration. As he ran, he sought to run in his mind with Skullik and his mate, and with Mara, trying to make the timing right.

Arrived at the cedars, he saw Mannimark signaling that the Mingol assault had begun. "Now howl like wolves," he told his hard-breathing men, "and really scream, each of you enough for two. Then we'll pour arrows toward 'em, longest range and fast as you can. Then, when I give command, back on the glacier again! as fast as we came down."

When all this was done (and without much marking of consequences—there was not time) and he had rejoined Mannimark, followed by his panting band, he saw with delight a thin column of black smoke ascending from the beached galley nearest the glaciers. Mingols began to run in that direction from the slopes of the beleaguered mound, abandoning their assault. Midway he saw the small figure of Mara running down the glacier to Cold Harbor, her red cloak standing out behind her. A woman with a spear had appeared on the earth wall nearest the child, waving her on encouragingly. Then of a sudden Mara appeared to take a fantastically long stride, part of her form was obscured, as if there were a blur in Fafhrd's vision there, and then she seemed to—no, did!—rise in the air, higher and higher, as though clutched by an invisible eagle, or other sightless predatory flier. He kept his eyes on the red cloak, which suddenly grew brighter as the invisible flier mounted from shadow into sunlight with his captive. He heard a muttered exclamation of sympathy and wonder close beside him, spared a sidewise glance, and knew that Skor also had seen the prodigy.

"Keep her in sight, man," he breathed. "Don't lose the red cloak for one moment. Mark where she goes through the trackless air."

The gaze of the two men went upward, then west, then steadily east toward the dark mountain. From time to time Fafhrd looked down to assure himself that there were no untoward developments requiring his attention of the situations at the ships and at Cold Harbor. Each time he feared his eyes would never catch sight of the flying cloak again, but each time they did. Skor seemed to be following instructions faithfully. The red patch grew smaller, tinier. They almost lost it as it dipped into the shadow again. Finally Skor straightened up.

"Where did it go?" Fafhrd asked.

"To the mouth of the cave at the snowline," Skor replied. "The girl was drawn there through the air by what magic I know not. I lost it there."

Fafhrd nodded. "Magic of a most special sort," he said rapidly. "She was carried there. I must believe, by an invisible flier, ghoul-related, an old enemy of mine, Prince Faroomfar of lofty Stardock. Only I among us have the knowledge to deal with him, know who are his helpers, who are his enemies."

He felt, in a way, that he was seeing Skor for the first time: a man an inch taller than himself and some five years younger, but with receding hairline and a rather scanty straggling russet beard. His nose had been broken at some time. He looked a thoughtful villain.

Fafhrd said, "In the Cold Waste near Illek-Ving I hired you. At No-omhrulsk I named you my chief lieutenant and you swore with the rest to obey me for Seahawk's voyage and return." He looked eyes with the man. "Now it comes to the test, for you must take command while I seek Mara. Continue to harry the Mingols but avoid a full engagement. Those of Cold Harbor are our friends, but do not join with them in their fort unless no other course is open. Remember we serve the lady Afreyt. Understood?"

Skor frowned, keeping his eyes locked with Fafhrd's, then nodded once.

"Good!" Fafhrd said, not sure at all that it was so, but knowing he was doing what he had to. The smoke from the burning ships was less—the Mingols seemed to have saved her. Skullik and his fellow came running back with their haws, grinning.

"Mannimark!" Fafhrd called. "Give me two torches. Skullik!—the tinder-pouch." He unhuckled the belt holding his longsword Graywand. He retained his ax.

"Men!" he addressed them. "I must be absent for a space. Command goes to Skor by this token." He huckled Graywand to that one's side. "Obey him faithfully. Keep yourselves whole. See that I'm given no cause to rebuke you when I return."

And without more ado he made off across the glacier toward Mount Hell-glow.



The Mouser forced himself to rise soon as he woke and to take a cold bath before his single cup of hot gahveh (he was in that sort of mood). He set his entire crew to work, Mingols and thieves alike, completing *Flotsam's* repairs, warning them that she must be ready to sail by the morrow's morn at least, in line with Loki-god's promise: "In three days the Mingols come." He took considerable pleasure in noting that several of them seemed to be suffering from worse hangovers than his own. "Work them hard, Pshawri," he commanded. "No mercy to slug-a-beds and shirkers!"

By then it was time to join with Cif in seeing off Afreyt's and Groniger's overland expedition. He found the Rimelander's offensively bright-eyed, noisy, and energetic, and the way that Groniger hustled about, marshaling them, was a caution.

Cif and Afreyt were clear-eyed and smiling also in their brave russets and blues, but that was easier to take. He and Cif walked a ways with the overland marchers. He noted with some amusement and approval that Afreyt had four of Groniger's men carrying a curtained litter, though she did not occupy it as yet.

So she was making the men pay for yesternight's false (or at least, tactless) accusations, and would cross the Deathlands in luxurious ease. That was more in his own style.

He was in an odd state of mind, almost feeling himself a spectator rather than a participant in great events. The incident of the stirring speech he had made last night and didn't remember (and couldn't discover) a word of still rankled (or rather the oration that god Loki had delivered through his lips while he was blacked out). He felt like the sort of unimportant servant, or errand boy, who's never allowed to know the contents of the sealed messages he's given to deliver.

In this role of observer and critic he was struck by how grotesque was the weaponry of the high-stepping and churlish Rimelander. There were the quarterstaves, of course, and heavy single-bladed spears, but also slim fishing spears and great pitchforks and wickedly hooked and notched pikes, and long flails with curious heavy swipes and swingles a-dangle from their ends. A couple even carried long narrow-bladed and sharp-looking spades. He remarked on it to Cif and she asked him how he armed his own thief-band. Afreyt had gone on a little ahead. They were nearing Gallows Hill.

"Why, with slings," he told Cif. "They're as good as haws and a lot less trouble to carry. Like this one," and he showed her the leather sling hanging from his belt. "See that old gibbet ahead? Now mark."

He selected a lead ball from his pouch, centered it in the strap and, sighting quickly but carefully, whirled it twice round his head and loosed. The *thunk* as it struck square on was unexpectedly loud and resounding. Some Rimelander's applauded.

Afreyt came hurrying back to tell him not to do that again—it might offend god Odin. Can't do anything right this morning, the Mouser told himself sourly.

But the incident had given him a thought. He said to Cif, "Say, maybe I was demonstrating the sling in my speech last night when I whirled the cube of square-dealing around on its cord. Do you recall? Sometimes I get drunk on my own words and don't remember too well."

She shook her head. "Perhaps you were," she said. "Or perhaps you were dramatizing the Great Maelstrom which will swallow the Sun Mingols. Oh, that wondrous speech!"



Meanwhile they had come abreast of Gallows Hill and Afreyt had halted the march. He strolled over with Cif to find out why and for farewells—this was about as far as they'd planned to come.

To his surprise he discovered that Afreyt had set the two men with spades and several others to digging up the gallows, to unrooting it entire, and also had had its bearers set down the litter in front of the little grove of gorse on the north side of the hill, and part its curtains. While he watched puzzledly, he saw the girls May and Gale emerge from the grove, walking slowly and carefully and going through the motions of assisting someone—only there was no one there.

Except for the men trying to rock the gallows loose, everyone had grown quite silent, watchfully attentive.

In low undertones Cif told the Mouser the girls' names and what was going on.

"You mean to say that's Odin god they're helping and they're able to see him?" he whispered back. "I remember now, Afreyt said she was taking him

along, but—can you see him at all?"

"Not very distinctly in this sunlight," she admitted. "But I have done so, by twilight. Afreyt says Fafhrd saw Odin most clearly in the dusk, evening before last. It's given only to Afreyt and the girls to see him clearly."

The strange slow pantomime was soon concluded. Afreyt cut a few spiny branches of gorse and put them in the litter ("So he'll feel at home," Cif explained to the Mouser) and started to draw the curtains, but, "He wants me inside with him," Gale announced in her shrill childish voice. Afreyt nodded, the little girl climbed in with a shrug of resignation, the curtains were drawn at last, and the general hush broke.

Lord, what idiocy! the Mouser thought. *We two-footed fantasies will believe anything.* And yet it occurred to him uneasily that he was a fine one to talk, who'd heard a god speak out of a fire and had his own body usurped by one. Inconsiderate creatures, gods were.

With a rush and a shout the gallows came down and its base up out of the earth, spraying dirt around, and a half dozen stalwart Rime Islanders lifted it onto their shoulders and prepared to carry it so, marching single file after the litter.

"Well, they *could* use it as a battering ram, I suppose," the Mouser muttered. Cif gave him a look.

Final farewells were said then and last messages for Fafhrd given and mutual assurances of courage until victory and death to the invader, and then the expedition went marching off in great swinging strides, rhythmically. The Mouser, standing with Cif as he watched them go toward the Deathlands, got the impression they were humming under their breaths, "Mingols to their deaths must go," and so on, and stepping to its tune, and he wondered if he'd begun to say those verses aloud, so that they'd picked it up from him. He shook his head.

But then he and Cif turned back alone, and he saw it was a bright day, pleasantly cool, with the breeze ruffling the heather and wildflowers waving on their delicate stems, and his spirits began to rise. Cif wore her russets in the shape of a short gown, rather than her customary trousers, and her dark golden-glinting hair was loose, and her movements were unforced and impulsive. She still had reserve, but it was not that of a councilwoman, and the Mouser remembered how thrilling last night's kiss had been, before he'd decided it didn't mean anything. Two fat lem-

mings popped out just ahead of them and stood on their hind legs, inspecting them, before ducking behind a bush, and in stopping so as not to overrun them, Cif stumbled and he caught her and after a moment drew her to him, and she yielded for a moment before she drew away, smiling at him troubledly.

"Gray Mouser," she said softly, "I am attracted to you, but I have told you how you resemble the god Loki—and last night when you swayed the Isle with your great oratory that resemblance was even more marked. I have also told you of my reluctance to take the god home with me (making me hire Hilsa and Rill, two familiar devils, to take care of him). Now I find, doubtless because of the resemblance, a kindred hesitation with respect to you, so that perhaps it is best we remain captain and councilwoman until the defense of Rime Isle is accomplished and I can sort you out from the god."

The Mouser took a long breath and said slowly that he supposed that was best, thinking meanwhile that gods surely interfered with one's private life, and that he was mightily tempted to ask her whether she expected *him* to turn to Hilsa and Rill (devils or no) to be comforted, but doubting she would be inclined to allow him a god's liberties to that degree (granted he desired such), no matter how great the resemblance between them.

In this impasse, he was rather relieved to see beyond Cif's shoulder that which allowed him to say, "Speaking of sheldons, who are these that are coming from Salthaven?"

Cif turned at that, and there true enough were Rill and Hilsa hurrying toward them through the heather, with Mother Grum plodding along behind, dark figure to their colorful ones. And although it was bright day three hours and more, Rill carried a lit torch. It was hard to see the flame in the sunlight, but they could mark by the way its shimmer made the heather waver beyond. And as the two harlots drew closer, it was evident that their faces were brimming with excitement and a story to tell, which was poured forth on their arrival and on the Mouser asking drily: "Why are you trying to light up the day, Rill?"

"The god spoke to us but now, most clearly from the Flame Den fire," she began, "saying 'Darkfire, Darkfire, take me to Darkfire. Follow the flame—!'"

Hilsa broke in, "—go as it bends," the god said cracklingly, "turn as it wends, all

in my name."

Rill took up again, "So I lit a fresh torch from the Flame Den blaze for him to travel in, and we carefully marked the flame and followed as it leaned, and it has led us to you?"

"And look," Hilsa broke in as Mother Grum came up, "now the flame would have us go to the mountain. It points toward her!" And she waved with her other hand north toward the icefall and the silent black scoriaceous peak beyond with its smoke-plume blowing west.

Cif and the Mouser dutifully looked at the torch's ghostly flame, narrowing their eyes. After a bit, "The flame *does* lean over," the Mouser said, "but I think that's just because it's burning unevenly. Something in the grain of the wood or its oils and resins—" but "No, indubitably it motions us toward Darkfire," Cif cried excitedly. "Lead on, Rill," and the women all turned sharply north, making for the glacier.

"But ladies, we have hardly time for a trip up-mountain," the Mouser called after protestingly, "what with preparations to be made for the Isle's defense and tomorrow's sailing against the Mingols."

"The god has commanded," Cif told him over shoulder. "He knows best."

While Mother Grum said in her growly voice, "I doubt not he intends us to make a closer journey than mountain-top. Roundabout is nearer than straight, I ween."

And with that mystifying remark the women went on, and the Mouser shrugged and perforce followed after, thinking what fools these women were to be scurrying after a burning bush or branch as if it were very god, even if the flame *did* bend most puzzlingly. (And he *had* heard the fire speak, night beforelast.) Well, at any rate, he wasn't really needed for today's repairs on *Flotsam*; Pshawri could boss the crew as well as he, or at least well enough. Best keep an eye on Cif while this odd fit was on her and see she came to no harm—or her three strangely sorted god-servants.

Such a sweet, strong, sensible, ravishing woman, Cif, when not godstruck. Lord, what troublesome, demanding and capricious employers gods were, never a quiet. (It was safe to think such thoughts, he told himself, gods couldn't read your thoughts—everyone had *that* privacy—though they could overhear your slightest word spoken in undertone—and doubtless make deductions from your starts and grimaces.)

Up from the depths of his skull came the wearisome compulsive chant, "Mingols to their deaths must go," and he was almost grateful to the malicious little jingle for occupying his mind troubled by the vagaries of gods and women.

The air grew chilly and soon they were at the icefall and in front of it a dead scrubby tree and a mounded upthrust of dark purplish rock, almost black, and in its midst a still blacker opening wide and tall as a door.

Cif said, "This was not here last year," and Mother Grum growled, "The glacier, receding, has uncovered it," and Rill cried, "The flame leans toward the cave!" and Cif said, "Go we down," and Hilsa quavered, "It's dark," and Mother Grum rumbled, "Have no fear. Dark is sometimes best light, and down best way go up."

The Mouser wasted no time on words, but broke three branches from the dead tree (Loki-torch might not last forever) and shouldering them, followed swiftly after the women into the rock.



Fafhrd doggedly climbed the last, seemingly endless slope of icy stone below Mount Hellglow's snowline. Orange light from the sun near-setting beat on his back

without warmth and bathed the mountainside and the dark peak above with its wispy smoke blowing east. The rock was tough as diamond with frequent handholds—made for climbing—but he was weary and beginning to condemn himself for having abandoned his men in peril (it amounted to that) to come on a wild romantic goose-chase. Wind blew from the west, crosswise to his climb.

This was what came of taking a girl on a dangerous expedition and listening to women—or one woman, rather. Afreyt had been so sure of herself, so queenly-commanding—that he'd gone along with her against his better judgment. Why, he was chasing after Mara now mostly for fear of what Afreyt would think of him if aught befell the girl. Oh, he knew all right how he'd justified himself this morning in giving himself this job rather than sending a couple of his men. He'd jumped to the conclusion it was Prince Faroomfar who had kidnapped Mara and he'd had the hope (in view of what Afreyt and Cif had told about being rescued from Khahkht's wizardry by flying mountain-princesses) that Princess Hiriwi, his beloved of one glorious night long gone, would come skimming along sightlessly on her invisible fish-of-air to offer him her aid against her hated brother.

That was another trouble with women: they were never there when you wanted or really needed them. They helped each other, all right, but they expected men to do all sorts of impossible feats of derring-do to prove themselves worthy of the great gift of their love (and what was that when you got down to it?—a fleeting clench-and-wriggle in the dark, illuminated only by the mute, incomprehensible perfection of a dainty breast, that left you bewildered and sad).

The way grew steeper, the light redder, his muscles smarted. The way it was going, darkness would catch him on the rock-face, and then for two hours at least the mountain would hide the rising moon.

And was it solely on Afreyt's account that he was seeking Mara? Wasn't it also because she had the same name as his first young sweetheart whom he'd abandoned with his unborn child when he'd left Cold Corner as a youth to go off with yet another woman, whom he'd in turn abandoned—or led unwittingly to her death, really the same thing? Wasn't he seeking to appease that earlier Mara by rescuing this child one? That was yet another trouble with women, or at least

the women you loved or had loved once—they kept on making you feel guilty, even beyond their deaths. Whether you loved them or not, you were invisibly chained to every woman who'd ever kindled you.

And was even that the deepest truth about himself sending himself after the girl Mara?—he asked himself, forcing his analysis into the next devious cranny, even as he forced his numbing hands to seek out the next holds on the still-steepening face in the dirty red light. Didn't he really quaken at thought of her, just as god Odin did in his senile lubricity? Wasn't he and no other chasing after Faroombur because he thought of the prince as a lecherous rival for this delicate tidbit of girl flesh?

For that matter, wasn't it Afreyt's girlishness that attracted him, her slenderness despite her height, her small-promising breasts, her tales of childhood make-believe maraudings with Cif, her violet-eyed romancing, her madcap bravado?—that had attracted him even in far-off Lankmar, chained him with figurative Rime Isle silver, and set him on the whole unsuitable course of becoming a responsible captain of men, he who had been all his days a lone wolf (with lone-leopard comrade Mouser)—and had but now reverted to it, abandoning his men. (Gods grant Skor keep his head and that some at least of his disciplines and preachments of prudence had taken effect!) But oh, this lifelong servitude to girls—whimsical, innocent, calculating, icicle-eyed-and hearted, fleeting, tripping little demons! White, slim-necked, sharp-toothed, restlessly bobbing wensels with the soulful eyes of lemuris!

His blindly reaching hand closed on emptiness and he realized that in his furious self-upbraiding he'd reached the apex of the slope without knowing it. With belated caution he lifted his head until his eyes looked just over the edge. The sun's last dark-red beams showed him a shale-scattered ledge some ten feet wide and then the mountain going up again precipitous and snowless. Opposite him in that new face was a great recess or cavern-mouth as wide as the ledge and twice that height. It was very dark inside that great door but he could make out the bright red of Mara's cloak, its hood raised, and within the hood, shadowed by it, her small face, very pale cheeked, very dark eyed—really, a smudge in darkness—staring toward him.

He scrambled up, peering around suspiciously, then moved toward her,

softly calling her name. She did not reply with word or sign though continuing to stare. There was a warm, faintly sulfurous breeze blowing out of the mountain and it ruffled her cloak. Falfurd's steps quickened and with a swift-growing anticipation of unknown horror whirled the cloak aside to reveal a small grinning skull set atop a narrow-shouldered wooden cross about four feet high.

Falfurd moved backwards to the ledge, breathing heavily. The sun had set and the gray sky seemed wider and more palely bright without its rays. The silence was deep. He looked along the ledge in both directions, fruitlessly. Then he stared into the cave again and his jaw tightened. He took flint and iron, opened the tinder-pouch, and kindled a torch. Then holding it high in his left hand and his unbelted ax gently aswing in his right, he walked forward into the cave and toward the mountain's heart, past the eerie diminutive scarecrow, his foot avoiding its stripped-away red cloak, along the strangely smooth-walled passageway wide and tall enough for a giant, or a winged man.

The Mouser hardly knew how long he'd been closely following the four godstruck females through the strangely tunnellike cave that was leading them deeper and deeper under the glacier toward the heart of the volcanic mountain Darkfire. Long enough, at any rate, for him while he walked to have split and slivered with his knife the larger ends of the three dead branches he was carrying, so they would kindle readily. And certainly long enough to become very weary of the Mingols' death-chant, or Mingol jingle, that was now not only resounding in his mind but being spoken aloud by the four rapt women as if it were a marching, or rather scurrying song, just as Groniger's men had seemed to feel it. Of course in this case he didn't have to ask himself where they'd got it, for they'd all originally heard it with him night before last in the Flame Den, when Loki god had seemed to speak from the fire, but that didn't make it any easier to endure, or one whit less boring.

At first he'd tried to reason with Cif as she hurried along with the others like a mad madam, arguing the unwisdom of venturing so recklessly into an uncharted cavern, but she'd only pointed at Rill's torch and said, "See how it strains ahead. The god commands us," and gone back to her chanting.

Well, there was no denying that the flame was bending forward most unnaturally when it should have been streaming back with their rapid advance—and also lasting longer than any torch should, a prodigy!—and so the Mouser had had to go back to memorizing as well as he could their route through the rock which, chill at first, as one would expect from the ice above, was now perceptibly warmer, while the heating air carried a faint brimstone stench.

But at all events, he told himself, he didn't have to like this sense of being the tool and sport of mysterious forces vastly more powerful than himself, forces that didn't even deign to tell him the words they spoke through him (that business of the speech he'd given but not heard one word of bothered him more and more), and above all he didn't have to celebrate this bondage to the inscrutable, as the women were doing, by mindlessly repeating words of death and doom.

Also he didn't like the feeling of being in bondage to women and absorbed more and more into their affairs, such as he'd felt ever since accepting Cif's commission three months ago in Lankmar, and which had put him in bondage, in turn, to Pshawri and Mikkidu and all his men, and to his ambitions and self-esteem.

Above all, he didn't like being in bondage to the idea of himself being a monstrous clever fellow who could walk widdershins round all the gods and godlets, from whom everyone expected godlike performance. Why couldn't he admit to Cif at least that he'd not heard a word of his supposedly great speech? And if he could do that walk-widdershins bit, why didn't he?



The cavernous tunnel they'd been following so long debouched into what seemed a far vaster space steaming with vapors and then they were suddenly brought up short against a great wall that seemed to extend indefinitely upward and

to either side.

The woe on broke off their doom-song and Rill cried, "Whither now, Loki?" and Hilsa echoed her tremulously and Mother Grum rumbled, "Tell us, wail," and Cif intoned strongly, "Speak, O god."

And while the women were saying these things, the Mouser stole forward rapidly and laid his hand on the wall. It was so hot he almost snatched back his hand, but did not, and through his palm and outspread fingers he felt a steady strong pulsation, a rhythm in the rock, exactly as if it were itself sounding the women's song.

And then as if in answer to the women's entreaty, the Loki torch, which had burnt down to little more than a stub, flared up into a great seven-branched flame, almost intolerably bright, so it was a wonder Rill could hold it, showing the frighteningly vast extent of the rock face, and even as it flared, the rock seemed to heave under the Mouser's hand monstrously with each pulsation of its song and the floor to rock with it, and the great rock face to bulge, and the heat became monstrous too, and the brimstone stench to multiply so they were all set a-gagging and a-coughing even as their imaginations envisioned instant earthquake, rock rended, cave-brimming floods of red-hot lava exploding from the mountain's heart.

It says much for the Mouser's prudence that in that short period of panic and terrified wonder it occurred to him to thrust one of his frayed branches into the blinding flame. And it was well he did so, for the great god-flame now died down as swiftly as it had flared up, leaving only the feeble illumination of the burning branch of ordinary dead wood afire in his hands while Rill dropped the dead stub of her burnt-out torch with a cry of pain, as if only now feeling how it had burned her, and while Hilsa whispered and all the women gazed about dazedly.

And as if command had now questionless passed to the Mouser with the torch, he now began to shepherd them back the way they had come, away from the strangling fumes, through the now-bewilderingly shadowy passageways that only he had conned and that still resounded with the dreadful rock music aping their own, a symphony of doom-song monstrously reverberated by solid stone—away toward the blessed outer light and air and sky, and fields and blessed sea.

Nor was that the full measure of the Mouser's farsighted prudence (so farsighted that he sometimes couldn't tell what was its aim), for in the moment of greatest panic, when the stub of Loki-torch had fallen from Rill's hand, he had thought to snatch it up from the rocky floor and thrust it, hardly more than a hot black cinder, deep into his pouch. It burnt his fingers a little, he discovered afterwards, but luckily it was not so hot that his pouch caught fire.



Afreyt sat on a lichened rock outside the litter on the broad summit-pass of the Deathlands (near where Falford had first encountered the Mingols, though she didn't know that) with her gray cloak huddled about her, resting. Now and again a wind from the east, whose chilliness seemed that of the violet sky, ruffled the litter's closed curtains. Its bearers had joined the other men at one of the small fires to the fore and rear, built with carried wood to heat chowder during this evening pause in their march. The galleons had been set down by Afreyt's direction and its base and beam-end wedged in rock, so that it rested like a fallen-over "L," its angle lifting above the litter like a crooked roof, or like a rooftop with one kingpost, and its bearers had gone off for supper too.

There was still enough sunset light in the west for her to wonder if that was smoke she saw moving east above the narrow crater of Mount Helliglow, while in the cold east there was sufficient night for her to see, she was almost sure, a faint glow rising from that of Mount Darkfire. The eastwind blew again and she hunched her shoulders and drew the hood of her cloak more closely against her cheeks.

The curtains of the litter parted for a moment and May slipped out and came and stood in front of Afreyt.

"What's that you've got around your neck?" she asked the girl.

"It's a noose," the latter explained eagerly, but with a certain solemnity. "I braided it, Odin showed me how to make the knot. We're all going to belong to the Order of the Noose, which is something Odin and I invented this afternoon while Gale was taking a nap."

Afreyt hesitatingly reached her hand to the girl's slender throat and inspected the loop of heavy braid with uneasy fascination. There, surely enough, was the cruel hangman's knot drawn rather close, and tucked into it a nosegay of small mountain flowers, somewhat wilted, gathered this morning on the lower slopes.

"I made one for Gale," the girl said. "She didn't want to wear it at first because I'd helped invent it. She was jealous."

Afreyt shook her head reprovingly, though her mind wasn't on that.

"Here," May continued, lifting her hand which had been hanging close to her side under her cloak. "I've made one for you, a little bigger. See, it's got flowers too. Put back your hood. You wear it under your hair, of course."

For a long moment Afreyt looked into the girl's unblinking eyes. Then she drew back her hood, bent down her head, and helped lift her hair through. Using both hands, May drew the knot together at the base of Afreyt's throat. "There," she said, "that's the way you wear it, snug but not tight."

While this was happening, Groniger had come up, carrying three bowls and a small covered pail of chowder. When the nooses had been explained to him, "A capital conceit!" he said with a great grin, his eyebrows lifting. "That'll show the Mingols something, let them know what they're in for. It's a grand chant the Little Captain gave us, isn't it?"

Afreyt nodded, looking sideways a moment at Groniger. "Yes," she said, "his wonderful words."

Groniger glanced back at her in similar fashion. "Yes, his wonderful words."

May said, "I wish I'd heard him."

Groniger handed them the bowls and swiftly poured the thick, steaming soup.

May said, "I'll take Gale hers."

Groniger said gruffly to Afreyt, "Sup it while it's hot. Then get some rest. We go on at moonrise, agreed?" and when Afreyt nodded, strode off rather humphously, cheerily rumble-humming the chant to which they'd marched all day, the Mouser's—or Loki's, rather.

Afreyt narrowed her brows. Normally Groniger was such a sober man, dull-spirited she'd once thought, but now he was almost like a buffoon. Was "monstrously comical" too strong an expression? She shook her head slowly. All the Rime-men were getting like that, loutish and grotesque and somehow bigger.

Perhaps it was her weariness made her see things askew and magnified, she told herself.

May came back and they got out their spoons and fell to. "Gale wanted to eat hers inside," the girl volunteered after a bit. "I think she and Odin are cooking up something." She shrugged and went back to her spooning. After another while: "I'm going to make nooses for Mara and Captain Fafhrd." Finally she scraped her bowl, set it aside, and said, "Cousin Afreyt, do you think Groniger's a troll?"

"What's that?" Afreyt asked.

"A word Odin uses. He says Groniger's a troll."

Gale came excitedly out of the litter with her empty bowl, but remembering to draw the curtains behind her.

"Odin and I have invented a marching song for us!" she announced, stacking her bowl in May's. "He says the other god's song is all right, but he should have one of his own. Listen, I'll chant it for you. It's shorter and faster than the other." She screwed up her face. "It's like a drum," she explained earnestly. Then, stamping with a foot: "March, march, over the Deathlands. Go, go, over the Doomlands. Doom!—kill the Mingsols. Doom!—die the heroes. Doom! Doom! Glorious doom!" Her voice had grown quite loud by the time she was done.

"Glorious doom?" Afreyt repeated.

"Yes. Come on, May, chant it with me."

"I don't know that I want to."

"Oh, come on. I'm wearing your noose, aren't I? Odin says we should all chant it."

As the two girls repeated the chant in their shrill voices with mounting enthusiasm, Groniger and another Rime-man came up.

"That's good," he said, collecting the howls. "Glorious doom is good."

"I like that one," the other man agreed. "Doom!—kill the Mingsols!" he repeated appreciatively.

They went off chanting it in low voices.

The night darkened. The wind blew. The girls grew quiet.

May said, "It's cold. The god'll be getting chilly. Gale, we'd better go inside. Will you be all right, cousin Afreyt?"

"I'll be all right."

A while after the curtains closed behind him, May stuck her head out.

"The god invites you to come inside with us," she called to Afreyt.

Afreyt caught her breath. Then she

said as evenly as she could, "Thank the god, but tell him I will remain here... on guard."

"Very well," May said and the curtains closed again.

Afreyt clenched her hands under her cloak. She hadn't admitted to anyone, even Cif, that for some time now, Odin had been fading. She could hardly see even a wispy outline any more. She could still hear his voice, but it had begun to grow faint, lost in wind-moaning. The god had been very real at first on that spring day when she and Cif had found him, and found that there were two gods, and worked through the confusion. He'd seemed so near death then, and she'd labored so hard to save him, and she'd been filled with such an adoration, as if he were some ancient hero-saint, or her own dear, dead father. And then he had caressed her fumblingly and muttered in disappointment (it sounded), "You're older than I thought," and drifted off to sleep, and her adoration had been contaminated by horror and rejection. And then she'd got the idea of bringing in the girls (Did that make her a monster? Well, perhaps.) and after that she'd managed very well, keeping it all at a distance.

And then there'd been the excitement of the journey to Lankhmar and the perils of Khakhk's ice-magic and the Mingsols and the renewed excitement of the arrival of the Mouser and Fafhrd and the realization that Fafhrd did indeed resemble a younger Odin—was *that* what had made god Odin fade and grow whisper-voiced? She didn't know, but she knew it helped make everything torturesome and confusing—and she couldn't have borne to enter the litter tonight. (Yes, she was a monster.)

She felt a sharp pain in her neck and realized that in her agitation she'd been tugging at the pendant end of the noose beneath her cloak. She loosened it and forced herself to sit quietly. It was full dark now. There were faint flames flickering from Darkfire and Hellglo too. She heard snatches of talk from the campfires and bits of the new chant and laughter as the story of that went round. It was very cold, but she did not move. The east grew silvery-pale, the milky effulgence domed up, and at last the white moon edged into view.

The camp stirred then and after a while the hearers came up and unweaved Odin's gallows and lifted it up and the litter too, and Afreyt arose, unliking

her stiff joints and stamping her numbed feet, and they all marched off west across the moon-silvered rock, shouldering their grotesque weapons and the two larger burdens. Some of them limped a bit (after all, they were sailors, their feet unused to marching) but they all went on briskly to the new Odin-chant, hunching their backs against the east wind, which now blew strong and steadily.



Fafhrd had just kindled his second torch from the ember-end of the first and his surroundings had grown warmer, when the lofty passageway he was following dehooked into a cavern so vast that the light he bore seemed lost in it at first and the sound of the cast-away torch-stub hitting rock awakened distant faint echoes and he came to a stop, peering up and around. Then he began to see multitudinous points of light distant as stars, where flakes of mica in the fire-horn stone reflected his torch, and in the middle distance an irregular pillar of mica-flecked rock and on its top a small pale handle that drew his eye. And then from far above he heard the beat of great wings, a pause, then another beat—as though a great culture were circling in the cavernous dark.

He called, "Mara!" toward the pillar and the echoes came back and amongst them, shrill and faint, his own name called and the echoes of that. Then he realized that the wing-beat had ceased and that one of the high mica-stars was getting rapidly brighter, as though it were swiftly traveling straight down toward him, and he heard a rush in the air as of a great hawk stooping.

He jerked his whole body aside from the bright sword darting at him and simultaneously struck with his ax just behind it. The torch was torn from his grasp, what seemed like a leather sail struck him to his knees, and then there was a great wing-beat, very close, and then another, and then the shrill hellow of a man in agony that despite its extremity held a note of outrage.

As he scrambled to his feet, he saw his torch flaring wide on the rocky floor and transfixing it the bright sword that had struck it from his grasp. Wing-beat and hellowing were going off from him now.

He set his boot on the torch handle, preparatory to withdrawing the sword from it, but as he went to take hold of the latter, his fingers encountered a scaly hand, slenderer than his own, gripping it tightly, and (his groping fingers ascertained) warmly wet at the wrist, where it had been chopped off—both hand and blood being alike invisible, so that although his fingers touched and felt, his eyes saw only the sword's hilt, the silver cross-guard, the pear-shaped silver pommel, and the black-leather grip wrapped with braided silver wire.

He heard his name spoken falteringly close behind him and turning saw Mara standing there in her white smocking looking woebegone and confused, as if she'd just been lifted from the pillar's top and set down there, and as he spoke her name in answer, a voice came out of the air beside Mara and a little above her, speaking in the chilling and confounding tones of a familiar and beloved voice turned hateful in nightmare.

The sightless mountain princess Hirriwi said, "Woe to you, barbarian, for having come north again without first paying your respects at Stardock. Woe to you for coming at another woman's call, although we favor her cause. Woe for deserting your men to chase this girl-chit, whom we would have (and have) saved without you. Woe for meddling with demons and gods. And woe upon woe for lifting your hand to maim a prince of Stardock, to whom we are joined, though he is our dearest enemy, by bonds stronger than love and hate. A head for a head and a hand for a hand, think on that. Quintuple woe!"

During this recital, Mara had moved to Fafhrd, where he knelt upright, his face working as he stared at and hearkened to emptiness, and he had put his arm about her shoulders and together they stared at the speaking gloom.

Hirriwi continued, her voice less ritually passionate, but every whit as cold. "Keyaira beals and comforts our brother, and I go to join them. At dawn we will return you, journeying upon our fish of air, to your people, where you will know your weird. Until then, rest in the warmth of Hellfire, which is not yet a danger to you."

With that she broke off and there was the sound of her going away, and the torch flickered low, almost consumed, and their great weariness took hold of Fafhrd and Mara and they lay down side by side and sleep was drawn up over them

from their toes to their eyes. Fafhrd, at last thought, wondered why it should move him so strangely that Mara clutched his left hand, bent up beside his shoulder, in both of hers.



Next day Salthaven was a-bustle so early and so wildly—so fantastically—with preparations for the great sailing that it was hard to tell where the inspirations of nightmare and worry-dream ended and those of (hopefully) wide-eyed day began. Even the "foreigners" were infected, as if they too had been hearing the Mingols-to-their-deaths chant in their dreams, so that the Mouser had been impelled against his better judgment to man Fafhrd's *Seahawk* with the most eager of them under Bomar their "mayor" and the lithmart tavern-owner and make Pshawri their captain with half the thieves to support his authority and two of the Mingols, Trenchi and Gavs, to help him on the ship.

"Remember you are boss," he told Pshawri. "Make them like it or lump it—and keep to windward of me."

Pshawri, his new-healed forehead wound still pink, nodded fiercely and went to take up his command. Above the salt cliff the eastern sky was ominously red with sunrise, while glooms of night still lingered in the west. The east wind blew strongly.

From *Flotsam's* stern the Mouser

surveyed the busy harbor and his fleet of fishing boats turned warships. Truly, they were a weird sight, their decks which had so recently been piled with fish now bristling with pikes and various impromptu weapons such as he'd seen Gromiger's men shoulder yesterday. Some of them had lashed huge ceremonial spears (bronze-pointed timbers, really) to their bowsprits—for use as rams, he supposed, the Fates be kind to 'em! While others had bent on red-and-black sails, to indicate bloody and baleful intentions, he guessed—the soberest fisherman was a potential pirate, that was sure. Three were half wreathed in fishnets—protection against arrow fire? The two largest craft were commanded by Dwone and Zwaaken, his subadmirals, if that could be credited. He shook his head.

If only he had time to get his thoughts straight! But ever since he'd awakened, events (and his own unpredictable impulses) had been rushing, nay, stampeding him. Yesterday, he'd managed to lead Cif and the other three women safely out of the quaking and stinking cave-tunnels (he glanced toward Darkfire—it was still venting into the red sky a thick column of black smoke, which the east wind blew west) only to discover that they'd spent an unconscionable time underground and it was already evening and after seeing to Rill's band, badly burned by the Lokitomb, they'd had to hurry back to Salthaven (for conferences with all and sundry—hardly time to compare notes with Cif on the whole cavern experience . . .)

And now he had to break off to help Mikkidu instruct the six Rimeland replacements for the thieves they'd lost to *Seahawk*—how to man the sweeps and so forth.

And *that* was no sooner done (matter of a few low-voiced instructions to Mikkidu, chiefly) than here came Cif climbing aboard, followed by Rill, Hilsa, and Mother Grum—all of them save for the last in sailorly trousers and jackets with knives at their belts. Rill's right arm was in a sling.

"Here we are, yours to command, captain," Cif said brightly.

"Dear . . . councilwoman," the Mouser answered, his heart sinking, "*Flotsam* can't sail into possible battle with women aboard, especially—" He let a meaningful look serve for "—whores and witches."

"Then we'll man *Sprite* and follow you after," she told him, not at all downcast. "Or rather range ahead to be the first to

sight the Suowise Mingols—you know *Sprite's* a fast sailer. Yes, perhaps that's best, a women's fighting-ship for soldieresses."

The Mouser submitted to the inevitable with what grace he could muster. Rill and Hilsa heaved. Cif touched his arm commiseratingly.

"I'm glad you agreed," she said. "I'd already loaned *Sprite* to three other women." But then her face grew serious as she lowered her voice to say, "There is a matter that troubles me you should know. We were going to bring god Loki aboard to a firepot, as yesterday he traveled in Rill's torch—"

"Can't have fire aboard a ship going into battle," the Mouser responded automatically. "Besides, look how Rill got burned."

"—but this morning, for the first time in over a year, we found the fire in the Flame Den unaccountably gone out," Cif finished. "We sifted the ashes. There was not a spark."

"Well," said the Mouser thoughtfully, "perhaps yesterday at the great rock face after he flamed so high the god temporarily shifted his dwelling to the mountain's fiery heart. See how she smokes!" And he pointed toward Darkfire, where the black column going off westward was thicker.

"Yes, but we don't have him at hand that way," Cif objected truthfully.

"Well, at any rate he's still on the island," the Mouser told her, "and in a sense, I'm sure, on *Floatsam* too," he added, remembering (it made his fire-sending fingers smart anew) the black torch-end he still had in his pouch. That was another thing, he told himself, that wanted thinking about....

But just then Dwone came sailing close by to report the Rime fleet ready for action and hardly to be held back, and the Mouser had perforce to get *Floatsam* underway, hoisting what sail she could carry for the heat against the wind, and setting his thieves and their green replacements to sweeping while Ourph beat time, so that she'd be able to keep ahead of the handler fishing craft.

There were cheers from the shore and the other ships and for a short while the Mouser was able to bask in self-satisfaction at *Floatsam* moving out so bravely at the head of the fleet, and his crew so well disciplined, and (he could see) Pshawri handling *Seahawk* nicely enough, and Cif standing beside him glowing-eyed, and himself a veritable admiral, no less, by Mog!

But then the thoughts which he hadn't had time to straighten all day began to cark him again and above all else the clear realization that there was something altogether foolhardy, in fact utterly ridiculous, about them all setting sail so confidently with only one hairbrained plan of action, on nothing more than the crackling word of a fire, the whisper of burning twigs. "In three days the Mingols come"—that and a compelling feeling in his bones that they were doing the right thing and nothing could harm them, and he would peradventure find the Mingol fleet and that another wonderful inspiration would come to him at the last minute....

At that moment his eye lit on Mikkidu sweeping with considerable style in the howmost steerside position and he came to a decision.

"Ourph, take the tiller and take her out," he directed. "Call time to the sweeps."

"My dear, I must leave you for a brief space," he told Cif. Then taking the last Mingol with him, he went forward and said in a gruff voice to Mikkidu, "Come with me to my cabin. A conference. Gih will replace you here," and then hurried below with his now apprehensive-eyed lieutenant past the wondering glances of the women.

Facing Mikkidu across the table in the low-ceilinged cabin (one good thing about having a short captain and still shorter crew, it occurred to him) and by the sufficient light from the small port-holes, he eyed his subordinate mercilessly and said, "Lieutenant, I made a speech to the Rime Islers in their council hall night before last that had them cheering me at the end. You were there. *What did I say?*"

Mikkidu writhed. "Oh, captain," he protested, blushing, "how can you expect—"

"Now none of that stuff about it being so wonderful you can't remember—or other weaseling out," the Mouser cut him short. "Pretend the ship's in a tempest and her safety depends on you giving me a square answer. Gods, haven't I taught you yet that no man of mine ever got hurt from me by telling me the truth?"

Mikkidu digested that with a great gulp and then surrendered. "Oh captain," he said, "I did a terrible thing. That night when I was following you from the docks to the council hall and you were with the two ladies, I bought a drink from a street vendor and gulped it down while you

weren't looking. It didn't taste strong at all, I swear it, but it must have had a tremendous delayed kick, for when you jumped on the table and started to talk, I blacked out—my word upon it!—and when I came to you were saying something about Groniger and Afreyt leading out half the Rimelanders to reinforce Captain Falfard and the rest of us sailing out to entice the Sun Mingols into a great whirlpool, and everybody was cheering like mad—and so of course I cheered too, just as if I'd heard everything that they had."

"You can swear to the truth of that?" the Mouser asked in a terrible voice.

Mikkidu nodded miserably.

The Mouser came swiftly around the table and embraced him and kissed him on his quivering cheek. "There's a good lieutenant," he said most warmly, clapping him on the back. "Now go, good Mikkidu, and invite the lady Cif attend me here. Then make yourself useful on deck in any way your shrewdness may suggest. Don't stand now in a daze. Get at it, man."

By the time Cif arrived (not long) he had decided on his approach to her.

"Dear Cif," he said without preamble, coming to her, "I have a confession to make to you," and then he told her quite humbly but clearly and succinctly the truth about his "wonderful words"—that he simply hadn't heard one of them. When he was done he added, "So you can see not even my vanity is involved—whatever it was, it was Loki's speech, not mine—so do you now tell me the truth about it, sparing me nothing."

She looked at him with a wondering smile and said, "Well, I was puzzled as to what you could have said to him to make Mikkidu so head-in-the-clouds happy—and am not sure I understand that even now. But, yes, my experience was, I now confess, identical with his—and not even the taking of an unknown drink to excuse it. My mind went blank, time passed me by, and I heard not a word you said, except those last directions about Afreyt's expedition and the whirlpool. But everyone was cheering and so I pretended to have heard, not wanting to injure your feelings or feel myself a fool. Oh, I was a sheep! Once I was minded to confess my lapse to Afreyt, and now I wish I had, for she had a strange look on her then—but I didn't. You think, as I do now, that she also—?"

The Mouser nodded decisively. "I think that not one soul of them heard a



word to remember of the main body of my—or, rather, Loki's talk, but later they all pretended to have done so, just like so many sheep indeed—and I the black goat leading them on. So only Loki knows what Loki said and we sail out upon an unknown course against the Mingols, taking all on trust."

"What to do now?" she asked wonderingly.

Looking into her eyes with a tentative smile and a slight shrug that was at once acquiescent and comical, he said, "Why, we go on, for it is your course and I am committed to it."

Flotsam gave a long lurch then, with a wave striking along her side, and it nudged Cif against him, and their arms went around each other, and their lips met thrillingly—but not for long, for he must hurry on deck, and she too, to discover (or rather confirm) what had befallen.

Flotsam had progressed out of Salt-haven harbor and the salt cliffs' lee to where the east wind smote them more urgently and the swells it engendered in Outer Sea, and the sunlight struck their canvas and deck. The Mouser took the tiller from sad-faced Ourph and that old one and Gib and Mikkidu set sail for the first eastward tack. And one by one *Seahawk* and the weirdly accoutered fishing boats repeated their maneuver, following *Flotsam* out.

That selfsame east wind which blew west across the southern half of Rime Isle, and against which *Flotsam* labored, farther out at sea was hurrying on the horse-ships of the Sunrise Mingols. The grim galleys, each with its belying square sail, made a great drove of ships, and now and again a stallion screamed in its bow-cage as they plunged ahead through the waves, which cascaded spray through the black, crazily-angled bars. All eyes strained west-ahead, and it would have been hard to say which eyes glared the more madly, those of the fur-clad, grinningly white-toothed men, or those of long-faced, grimacingly white-toothed beasts.

On the poop of the flagship this frenzy looked in a more philosophical direction, where Gonov discoursed with his witch doctor and attendant sages propounding such questions as, "Is it sufficient to burn a city to the ground, or must it also be trampled to rubble?" and contemplating such answers as, "Most meritorious is to pound it to sand, aye, to fine loam, without burning at all."

While the strong westwind that blew east across the northern half of the island (with a belt of squalls and fierce eddies between the two winds) was hurrying on from west across trackless ocean the like fleet of the Widdershins Mingols, where Edumir had proposed this query to his philosophers: "Is death by suicide in the

first charge, hurling oneself upon the foe-man's virgin spear, to be preferred to death by self-administered poison in the last charge?"

He hearkened to their closely-reasoned answers and to the counter-question: "Since death is so much to be desired, surpassing the delights of love and mushroom wine, how did our all-noble and revered ancestors ever survive to procreate us?" and at last observed, his white-rimmed eyes gazing east yearningly, "That is all theory. On Rime Isle we will once more put these recondite matters to the test of practice."

While high above all winds Khakhkt in his icy sphere ceaselessly studied the map lining it, whereon he moved counters for ships and men, horses and women—aye, even gods—bending his bristly face close, so that no unlawful piece might escape his fierce scrutiny.

By early morning sunlight and against the nipping wind, Afreyt hurried on alone through heather dotted by stunted cedars past the last silent hill farm, with its sagging gray-green turf roofs, before Cold Harbor. She was footsore and weary (even Odin's noose around her neck seemed a heavy weight) for they'd marched all night with only two short rest-stops and midway they'd been buffeted by changing winds reaching tornadic strength as they'd passed through the transition belt between the southeastern, Saltbaven half of Rime Isle, which the east wind presently ruled, and the northwestern, Cold Harbor half, where the equally strong west wind now held sway. Yet she forced herself to scan carefully ahead for friend or foe, for she had constituted herself vanguard for Groniger and his grotesquely burdened trampers. A while ago in the twilight before dawn she'd gone from litter-side up to the head of the column and pointed out to Groniger the need of having a guard ahead now that they were nearing their journey's end and should be wary of ambushes, but he had seemed unconcerned and heedless, unable to grasp the danger, almost as if he (and all the other Rime men, for that matter) were intent only on marching on and on, glazed-eyed, growling Gale's doom-chant, like so many monstrous automatons, until they met the Mingols, or Falfrid's force, or falling those, would stride into the chilly western ocean with never a balt or waver, as did the lemming hordes in their climacteric. But neither had Groniger

voiced any objection to her spying on ahead—nor even concern for her safety. Where was the man's one-time clearheadedness and prudence?

Afreyt was not unversed in island woodcraft and she now spotted Skor peering toward Cold Harbor from the grove of dwarf cedars whence Fafhrd had launched yestermorning's brief arrow-fussillade. She called Sknr's name, he whipped around nocking an arrow to his bow, then came up swiftly when he saw her familiar blues.

"Lady Afreyt, what do you here? You look weary," he greeted her succinctly. He looked weary himself and hollow-eyed, his cheeks and forehead smudged with soot above his straggly russet beard, perhaps against the glare of glacial ice.

She quickly told him about the Rimeland reinforcements approaching behind her.

His weariness seemed to lift from him as she spoke. "That's brave news," he said when she had done. "We joined our lines (I'm now making the rounds of them) with those of the Cold Harbor defenders before sunset yesterday and have the Mingol foreriders penned on the beach—and all by bluff! The mere sight of the forces you describe, strategically deployed, will cause 'em to take ship and sail away, I think—and we not lift a finger."

"Your pardon, lieutenant," she rejoined, her own weariness lifting at his optimism, "but I have heard you and your fellows named berserkers—and have always thought it was the way of such to charge the enemy at the first chance, charge wolf-howling and bounding, mother-naked?"

"To tell the truth, that was once my own understanding of it," he replied, thoughtfully rubbing his broken nose with the back of his hand, "but the captain's changed my mind for me. He's a great one for sleights and deccits, the captain is! Makes the foe imagine things, sets their own minds to work against 'em, never fights when there's an easier way—and some of his wisdom has rubbed off on us."

"Why are you wearing Fafhrd's sword?" she asked, seeing it suddenly.

"Oh, he went off yestermorning to Helliglow after the girl, leaving me in command, and he's not yet returned," Skor answered readily, though a crease of concern appeared between his brows, and he went on briefly to tell Afreyt about Mara's strange abduction.

"I wonder at him leaving you all so long to shift without him, merely for that," Afreyt commented, frowning.

"Truth to tell, I wondered at it myself, yestermorning," Skor admitted. "But as events came on us, I asked myself what the captain would do in each case, and did that, and it's worked out—so far." He hooked a middle finger over a fore one.

There came a faint tramping and the whispers of a hoarse chant and turning they saw the front of the Rime column coming downhill.

"Well, they look fearsome enough," Skor said, after a moment. "Strange, too," he added, as the litter and galleys hove into view. The girls in their red cinaks were walking beside the former.

"Yes, they are that," Afreyt said.

"How are they armed?" he asked her. "I mean, besides the pikes and spears and quarterstaves and such?"

She told him those were their only weapons, as far as she knew.

"They'd not stand up to Mingols, then, not if they had to enver any distance to attack," he judged. "Still, if we showed 'em under the right conditions, and put a few bowmen amongst 'em..."

"The problem, I think, will be to keep them from charging," Afreyt told him. "Or, at any rate, to get them in step marching."

"Oh, so it's that way," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Cousin Afreyt! Cousin Afreyt! May and Gale were crying shrilly while they waved at her. But then the girls were pointing overhead and calling, "Look! Look!" and next they were running downhill alongside the column, still waving and calling and pointing at the sky.

Afreyt and Skor looked up and saw, at least a hundred yards above them, the figures of a man and a small girl (Mara by her red cloak) stretched out flat on their faces and clinging to each other and to something invisible that was swiftly swooping toward Cold Harbor. They came around in a great curve, getting lower all the time, and headed straight for Skor and Afreyt. She saw it was Fafhrd and Mara, all right, and she realized that she and Cif must have looked just as when they were being rescued from Khakhk's blizzard by the invisible mountain princesses. She clutched Skor, saying rapidly and somewhat breathlessly, "They're all right. They're banging onto a fish-of-the-air, which is like a thick flying carpet that's alive, but invisible. It's

guided by an invisible woman."

"It would be," he retorted obscurely, and then they were buffeted by a great gust of air as Fafhrd and Mara sped past close overhead and still flat out (both of them grinning excitedly, Afreyt was able to note as she cringed down, at least Fafhrd's lips were drawn back from his teeth) and came to rest midway between her and Groniger at the head of the column, which had slowed to gawk, about a foot above the heather, which was pressed down in a large oval patch, as if Fafhrd and Mara were lying prone on an invisible mattress wide and thick enough for a king's bed.

Then the air travelers had scrambled to their feet and jumped down after an unsteady step or two, and Skor and Afreyt were closing in on them from one side and May and Gale from the other, while the Rimelanders stared open-mouthed, and Mara was shrieking to the other girls, "I was abducted by a very nasty demon, but Fafhrd rescued me! He chopped off its hand!" And Fafhrd had thrown his arms around Afreyt (she realized she'd invited it) and he was saying, "Afreyt, thank Kos you're here. What's that you've got around your neck?" and next, without letting Afreyt go, to Skor, "How are the men? What's your position?" While the staring Rimelanders marched on slowly and almost painfully, like sleepers peering at another wanderer out of a nightmare which has entrapped them.

And then all others grew suddenly silent and Fafhrd's arms dropped away from Afreyt as a voice that she had last heard in a cave on Darkfire called out like an articulate silver trumpet, "Farewell, girl. Farewell, barbarian. Next time, think of the courtesies due between orders and of your limitations. My debt's discharged, while yours has but begun."

And with that a wind blew out from where Fafhrd and Mara had landed (from under the invisible mattress, one must think), bending the heather and blowing the girls' red cloaks not straight from them (Afreyt felt it and got a whiff of animal stench neither fish nor fowl nor four-legged) and then it was as if something large and living were taking off into the air and swiftly away, while a silvery laughter receded.

Fafhrd threw up his hand in farewell, then brought it down in a sweeping gesture that seemed to mean, "Let's say good-bye to all that!" While his expression, which had grown bleakly troubled

during Hirriwi's speaking, became grimly determined as he saw the Rime column marching slowly into them. "Master Groniger!" he said sharply and "Captain Fafhrd?" that one replied thickly, as one half-rousing from a dream, and "Halt your men!" Fafhrd commanded, and then turned to Skor, who made report, telling his leader in somewhat more detail matter told earlier to Afreyt, while the column slowly ground to a halt, piling up around Groniger in a disorderly array.

Meanwhile Afreyt had knelt beside Mara, assured herself that the girl wasn't outwardly injured, and was listening bemused as Mara proudly but deprecatingly told the other girls about her abduction and rescue. "He made a scarecrow out of my cloak and the skull of the last little girl he'd eaten alive, he said, and he kept touching me, just like Odin does, but Fafhrd cut off his hand and Princess Hirriwi got my cloak back this morning. It was neat riding through the sky. I didn't get dizzy once."

Gale said, "Odin and I made up a marching song. It's about killing Mingols. Everyone's chanting it," and May said, "I made nooses with flowers in them. They're a mark of honor from Odin. We're all wearing them. I made one for you and a big one for Fafhrd. Say, I've got to give Fafhrd his noose. It's time he was wearing it, with a big battle coming."

When this had been explained to Fafhrd (he forced himself to listen patiently, for he'd wanted to know what that ugly thing around Afreyt's neck was) and when Mara had asked him to bend down his head, he looked up and saw the curtained litter, set down meanwhile beside the girls, and he recognized the uprooted gallows beyond it, and he felt a shivery revulsion and said angrily, "No, I won't wear it. I won't mount his eight-legged horse. Get those things off your necks, all of you!"

But then he saw the hurt, distrustful look in the girls' eyes as Mara protested, "But it's to make you strong in battle. It's an honor from Odin," and the look of concern for the girls in Afreyt's eyes as she gestured toward the litter, its curtains fluttering in the wind (and he sensed the grim holiness that seemed to emanate from it), and he saw the look of expectation in the eyes of Groniger and the other Rimers, and he thought hard for a moment and then he said, making his voice eager, "I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll wear it around my wrist, to strengthen it," and he thrust his left hand through the

noose and after a moment May tightened it.

"My left arm," he explained, lying somewhat, "has always been markedly weaker than my right in battle. This noose will help strengthen it. I'll take yours too," he said to Afreyt with a meaningful look.

She loosened it from around her neck with feelings of relief which partly changed to apprehension as she saw it tightened around Fafhrd's wrist beside the first noose.

"And yours, and yours, and yours," he said to the three girls. "That way I'll be wearing a noose for each of you. Come on, you wouldn't want my left arm weak in battle, would you?"

"There!" he said when it was done, gripping the five pendant cords in his left hand and whirling them. "We'll whip the Mingols off Rime Isle, we will!"

The girls, who had seemed a little unhappy about losing their nooses, laughed delightedly, and the Rimers raised an unexpected cheer.

Then they marched on, Skor scouting ahead after remembering to give Fafhrd back his sword, and Fafhrd trying to put some order into the Rimers and keep them quiet (although the wind helpfully blew the drum-noise of their chant from the beach), and the girls and Afreyt dropping back with the litter, though not as far as Fafhrd wished. The company picked up a couple of Fafhrd's men, who reported the Mingols massing on the beach around their ships. And then they mounted a slight rise where the lines extended south from the fortress-hump of Cold Harbor, Fafhrd and his men bolding back the now overeager Rimers, and a mounting cry of woe came from the beach beyond and they all beheld a wonderfully satisfying sight: the three Sea Mingol galleys launching into the wind, forward oars out and working frantically while small figures gave a last heave to the sterns and scrambled aboard.

Then came an arresting cry from Cold Harbor and they began to see out in the watery west a host of sails coming up over the horizon: the Widder-Mingol fleet. And with the sight of it they became aware also of a faint distant rumbling, as of the hoofbeat of innumerable war-horses charging across the steppes. But the Rimelunders recognized it as the voice of Hellfire, threatening eruption where it smoked blackly to the north. While to the south churned high-domed clouds, betokening a change of wind and weather.



The Gray Mouser fully realized that he was in one of the tightest spots he'd ever been in during the course of a danger-dappled career—with this difference, that this time the spot was shared by three hundred friendly folk (even dear, thinking of Cif beside him), along with any number of enemies (the Sea-Sea-Mingol fleet, that was, in close pursuit). He'd raised them (the Mingols) with the greatest of ease and was now luring them so successfully to their destruction that *Floasam* was last, not first, of the Rime Island fleet, which was spread out disorderly before him, *Seahawk* nearest, and within arrow range of the pursuing Mingols, who came in endless foaming shrieking whinnying numbers, their galleys sailing faster with the wind than he. Moments ago one of the horse-ships had driven herself under with excess of sail, and foundered, and not a sister ship had paused to give her aid. Dead ahead some four leagues distant was the Rime coast with the two great and inviting hay (and blackly smoking Darkfire beyond) that marked the position of the Great Maelstrom. North, the clouds churned,

promising change of weather. The problem, as always, was how to get the Mingols into the Maelstrom, while avoiding it himself (and his friends with him), but he had never appreciated the problem quite so well as now. The hoped-for solution was that the whirlpool would turn on just after the Rimers and *Seahawk* and he had sailed across it, and so catch at least the van of the close-crowding Mingol fleet. And the way they were all bunched now, that required perfect, indeed Godlike timing, but he'd worked his hardest at it and after all the gods were supposed to be on his side, weren't they?—at least two of them.

The horse-galleys of the Mingols were so close that Mikkidu and his thieves had their slings ready, loaded with leaden ball, though under orders not to cast unless the Mingols started arrow fire. Across the waves a stallion screamed from its cage.

Thought of the Maelstrom made the Mouser look in his pouch for the golden queller. He found it, all right, but somehow the charred stub of the Loki-torch had got wedged inside it. It really was no more than a black cinder. No wonder Rill had burned herself so badly, he thought, glancing at her bandaged hand. (When Cif had stayed on deck, the harlots had insisted on the same privilege and it seemed to cheer the men. Mother Grum was with them.)

The Mouser started to unweedge the black god-brand, but then the odd thought occurred to him that Loki, being a god (and in some sense this cinder was Loki), deserved a golden house, or carapace, so on a whim he wrapped the length of stout cord attached to it tightly round and round the weighty golden cube and knotted it, so that the two objects—queller and god-brand—were inextricably conjoined.

Cif nudged him. Her gold-flecked green eyes were dancing, as if to say, "Isn't this exciting?"

He nodded a somewhat temperate agreement. Oh, it was exciting, all right, but it was also damnably uncertain—everything had to work out just so—why, he could still only guess at the directions god Loki had given them in the speech he had forgotten and none else had heard....

He looked around the deck, surveying faces. It was strange, but everyone's eyes seemed to flash with the same eager juvenile excitement as was in Cif's... it

was even in Gavs's, Trenchi's, and Gih's (the Mingols)... even in Mother Grum's, bright as black beads....

In all eyes, that is, except the wrinkle-netted ones of old Ourph helping Gavs with the tiller. They seemed to express a sad and patient resignation, as though contemplating tranquilly from some distance a great and universal woe. On an impulse the Mouser took him from his task and drew him to the lee rail.

For the space of perhaps two breaths the old Mingol stared at him curiously, then he slowly shook his bald dome, saying, "No, captain, I heard every last word you spoke (my eyes begin to fail me a little, but my ears not) and they greatly saddened me (your words) for they expressed the same philosophy as seizures upon my steppe-folk at their chimeratics (and often otherwhen), the malign philosophy that caused me to part company with them in early years and make my life among the heathen."

"What do you mean?" the Mouser demanded. "A favor—be brief as possible."

"Old man," he said, "you were at the council hall the night before last when I spoke to them all and they cheered me. I take it that, like the rest, you heard not one word of what I said, or at best only a few—the directives for Groniger's party and our sailing today?"

"Why, you spoke—most winningly indeed (even I was tempted)—of the glories of death and of what grand thing it was to go down joyfully to destruction carrying your enemies with you (and as many as possible of your friends also), how this was the law of life and its crowning beauty and grandeur, its supreme satisfaction. And as you told them all that they soon must die and how, they all cheered you as heartily as would have my own Mingols in their climacteric and with the selfsame gleam in their eyes. I well know that gleam. And, as I say, it greatly saddened me (to find you so fervent a death-lover) but since you are my captain, I accepted it."

The Mouser turned his head and looked straight into the astonished eyes of Cif, who had followed close behind him and heard every word old Ourph had spoken, and looking into each other's eyes they saw the same identical understanding.

At that very instant the Mouser felt *Flotsam* beneath his feet slammed to a stop, spun sideways to her course, and sent off circling at prodigious speed just

as had happened to *Sprue* day before yesterday, but with a greater force proportionate to her larger size. The heavens reeled, the sea went black. He and Cif were brought up against the taffrail along with a clutter of thieves, whores, witches (well, one witch), and Mingol sailors. He bid Cif cling to it for dearest life, then found his footing on the tilted deck, and raced past the rattling whipping mainsail (and past young Mikkidu embracing the mainmast with eyes tight shut in ultimate terror or perhaps in rapture) to where his own vision was unimpeded.

Flotsam, *Seahawk*, and the whole Rime fleet were circling at dizzying velocity more than halfway down the sides of a whirlpool at least two leagues wide, whose wide-spinning upper reaches held what looked like the entire Mingol fleet, the galleys near the edge tiny as toys against the churning sky, while at the maelstrom's still-distant center the fanged rocks protruding through the white welter there were like a field of death.

Next below *Flotsam* in the vast wheel of doom spun Dwone's fishing smack, so close he could see facts. The Rimers clutching their weird weapons and each other looked monstrously happy, like drunken and lopsided giants bound for a ball. Of course, he told himself, these were the monsters whose quickening Loki had envisioned, these were the trolls or whatever. And that reminded him of what, by Ourph's irrefutable testimony, Loki intended for them all and peradventure for Falhrd and Afreyt also, and all the universe of seas and stars.

He snatched the golden queller from his pouch and seeing the black cinder at its heart thought, "Good!—rid of two evils at one stroke." Aye, but he must pitch it to the whirlpool's midst, and how to get it there, so far away? There was some simple solution, he was sure, it was on the tip of his unseem thoughts, but there were really so many distractions at the moment....

Cif nudged him in the waist—one more distraction. As he might have expected, she had followed him close against his strictest bidding and now with a wicked grin was pointing at... of course, his sling!

He centered the precious missile in the strap and motioning Cif to the mast to give him room, traded out his footing on the tilted deck, taking short dancing steps, and measuring out distance, speed,

windage, and various imponderables with his eyes and brain. And as he did those things, whirling the queller-brand about his head, dancing out as it were the prelude to what must be his life's longest and supremest cast, there danced up from his mind's darkest deeps words that must have been brewing there for days, words that matched Loki's final four evil couplets in every particular, even the rhymes (almost), but that totally reversed their meaning. And as the words came bobbing to the surface of his awareness he spoke them out, softly he thought, though in a very clear voice—until he saw that Cif was listening to him with unmistakable delight at each turn of phrase, and Mikkidu had his shut eyes open and was hearing, and the monstrous Rimers on Dwone's smack had all their sobering faces turned his way, and he somehow had the conviction that in the midst of that monstrous tumult of the elements his words were nevertheless being heard to the whirlpool's league-distant rim—aye, and beyond that, he knew not how far. And this is what he spoke: "Mingols to their deaths must go? Oh, not so, not so, not so! Mingols, draw an easy breath. Leave to wanton after death. Let there be an end to strife—even Mingols relish life. Mingol madness cease to burn. Gods to proper worlds return."

And with that he spun dancingly across the deck, as though he were hurling the discus, the queller-brand at the end of his sling a gold-glimting arclet above his head, and loosed. The queller-brand sped up gleaming toward the whirlpool's midst until it was too small for sight.

And then... the vasty whirlpool was struck flat. Black water foamed white. Sea and sky churned as one. And through that hell of the winds' howling and the waves' crash there came a rumbling earth-shaking thunder and the red flash of huge distant flames as Darkfire erupted, compounding pandemonium, adding the strokes of earth and fire to those of water and air, completing the uproar and riot of the four elements. All ships were chips in chaos, glimpsed dimly if at all, to which men clung like ants. Squalls blew from every compass-point, it seemed, warring together. Foam covered decks, mounded to mast tops.

But before that had transpired quite in *Flotsam's* case, the Mouser and some others too, gripping rail or mast, eyes stinging with salt sea, had seen, mounting for a few brief moments to the sky, from the whirlpool's very midst as it was

smitten flat, what looked like the end of a black rainbow (or a skinny and curving black waterspout impossibly tall, some said afterwards) that left a hole behind it in the dark clouds, through which something maddening and powerful had vanished forever from their minds, their beings, and from all Nehwon.

And then the Mouser and his crew and the women with them were all fighting to save themselves and *Flotsam* in the midst of an ocean that was all cross chop and in the teeth of a gale that had reversed direction completely and now blew from the west, carrying the thick black smoke from Darkfire out toward them. Around them other ships fought the same fight in

a great rolling confusion covering several square leagues that gradually sorted itself out. The Rime fishing boats and smacks (somewhat larger) with their handier rigs (and *Flotsam* and *Seahawk* too) were able to tack southwest against the wind and set slow courses for Salthaven. The Mingol galleys with their square sails could only run before it (the heavy seas preventing the use of oars) away from the sobering chaos of the dreadful isle whose black smoke pursued them and their dreary drenched stallions. Some of the borse-ships may have sunk, for *Flotsam* fished two Mingols out of the waves, but these were unclear as to whether they had been swept overboard or their ships lost,

(Continued on P. 68)





George Schelling

TIN EAR

Oh, Oh, Oh, Listen to the Music!

Arranged by
SPIDER ROBINSON

Call them Stargates if you want to. The term was firmly engraved in the public's mind, by science-fiction writers with a weakness for grandiose jargon, fully fifty years before the first Spatial Anomaly was discovered and the War started. If you do call them Stargates, you probably call us Stargate Keepers, or Keepers for short.

But we call 'em 'Holes, for short, and we call ourselves Wipers.

It's all in how you look at it, of course. If we ever got to enter one, instead of just watching them and mopping up what comes out, we might have a different name for them—or if not, at least a different name for ourselves. "...and cheap ones, too," as the joke goes.

But the Enemy's drones keep popping out at irregular intervals, robot-destroyer planetoids with simple but straightforward programs written somewhere on the far side of hyperspace. So, in addition to the heroes who get to go after the source—and keep failing to return—somebody has to mount guard over every known 'Hole, to sound the alarm when a drone comes through, and hopefully to neutralize it (before it neutralizes us). The War is still, after twenty years, at the stage where intact prizes are more valuable than confirmed kills. Data outworth debris, and will for decades to come.

For the Enemy, apparently, as much as for us, or I wouldn't be here. The first Enemy drone I ever saw could certainly have killed us both, if it had wanted to.

It was well that Walter and I inhabited separate Pods. We didn't get along at all. The only things we had in common were (a) an abiding hatred for the government which had drafted us into this silly suicidal employ ("...before we had a chance to volunteer like gentlemen," we always added) and (b) a deep enjoyment of music.

But all Wipers share these two things. One of the few compensations our cramped and claustrophobic Pods feature are their microtape libraries and excellent playback systems (you can't read properly by starlight, and combat status permits no other kind). And so it was possible for Walter and I to spend endless hours within the same general volume of space, listening to separate masterpieces over our headphones and arguing only occasionally. Walter had

no sense of humor whatsoever, despised anyone who did, loathed any music of satirical, parodying or punning nature, and therefore was impossible to discuss music with. Or anything much.

But you can listen to a lot of good music if you have nothing else to do.

I was seventeen hours into Wagner's *Ring Des Niebelungen*, thoroughly exhausted but with the end in sight, when Walter's comm-laser overrode my headphones. "George."

"Who?" I yelled, but there was too much cacophony. We both had to kill our tapes. Damned if he didn't have *Siegfried* on himself, which annoyed me—I was certain, without asking, that he liked Wagner for all the wrong reasons.

"Alert status," he said, yanking me from music back to reality.

"Right." I slapped switches and reached out to touch my imitation rabbit's foot. So the 'Hole was puckering up, eh? A noble death might lie seconds away. With all possible speed I joined Walter in training all the considerable firepower we possessed on the 'Hole.

And the bastard popped out a couple thousand miles to one side of the 'Hole and bagged us both. Unheard of; still unexplained. Even Abacus AI, the computer you can count on, was caught flat-footed. Tractor beam grabs me, *clang!*, reels in fast, *CLANG!*, half a billion Rockies' worth of Terran hardware on alien flypaper, *slump*, body goes limp in shock-webbing, *ping!*, lights go out.

"George," Walter was saying in my headphones, "are you all right?"

"I'll see," I replied, but by then some sort of laserproof barrier must've been interposed by the drone-planetoid which held us captive, for the laser went dead. I sighed and checked my Pod. It was on its gyrostabilized tail, "upright." All my video screens were dead, except for the one that showed me about twenty degrees of starry space straight "overhead"—my location with reference to Walter was unknown. This was serious if I intended to live, which I did. But before I tried the radio I inspected my weapons control systems (dead in all directions except "up"), main drive (alive, but insufficient to pry me loose), and my body (alive and apparently unharmed). Then I heated up the radio on standard emergency band.

"Down one freak, Cipher A," I said crisply and quickly, getting it all out before static jammed that frequency.

Then I dialed 'er down to the next frequency on the "standard" list, instructed Abacus AI the AnaLogic to convert to Cipher A before transmitting. "Walter?"

"Here." Flat, mechanical voice—AI's rendition of human speech, just like what Walter was hearing from me.

"Simpleton machine."

"Yah."

"Capture, not kill. Programmed to immobilize us, disarm us, blind us, and prevent meaningful communication between us. As soon as it dopes out Cipher A, it'll..."

A million pounds of frying bacon drowned me out. I dropped freak by the same interval again and shifted to Cipher B, allegedly a much tougher cipher to break. They call it "the best nonperfect cipher possible."

Walter was waiting on the new freak. "It's essential," he began at once, "that we determine whether this drone-planetoid is a Mark I or a Mark II."

"Damn right," I agreed. "If we can work out our relative positions we've at least got options."

And a roar of static threw Cipher B out the window.

Both types of Enemy planetoid have only the two tractor beams—but the relative positions of them are one of the chief distinguishing features from the outside. If this was a Mark I, we could both throw full power to our drives—and while they wouldn't be sufficient to peel us loose, their energies should cross, like surgical paired-lasers, at the center of the planetoid, burning out its volitional hardware. If this were Mark the Second, the same maneuver would have our drives cross in the heart of the power-plant and distribute the component atoms of all three of us across an enormous spherical volume of space. But how could we compute our positions blind, on a sphere with no agreed-upon poles or meridians anyhow, and communicate them to each other's computers without tripping the damned planetoid's squeak-program? The cagey son of a bitch had cracked Cipher B too easily—apparently it was programmed to jam anything that it computed to be "exchange of meaningful information" whether it could decipher it or not. That suggested that Cipher C, the Perfect Cipher, might be the only answer.

The perfect cipher (really a code-

cipher) was devised way back in the 1900s, and has never been improved upon. You have a computer generate an enormous run of random numbers, in duplicate. You give a copy of the print-out to each communicator, and down the column of random numbers they go, each writing out the alphabet, one letter to each number, over and over again. For each successive letter they want to encipher and send, they jump down to the next alphabet-group in line, select the random number adjacent to the desired letter and transmit that number. A savvy AnaLogic deduces pauses, activates voder: communication. The cipher cannot be broken by anyone not in possession of an identical list of random numbers, for it produces utterly no pattern. (We had a code, by the way, a true code, in which prearranged four-letter groups stood for various prearranged phrases. But not a phrase on the list applied to our situation—I love the Army—and using a series of exclusively four-letter groups would have tipped off the alien computer that a code was in use.)

But Cipher C had one flaw that I could see, and so I hesitated before dialing the frequency again. If we lost this chance, we were effectively deaf and dumb as well as blind. *Oh God, I prayed, give Walter just this once, and for no more than fifteen minutes, at least a half a brain.* I dialed the new freak.

"... got to take starsights," he was saying. "It's the only way to..."

"SHUT UP!"

"Eh?"

"No sound. Listen. *Heed.* Okay? Carefully. Yes, 'sights,' but do not under any circumstances repeat any phrase or word-group I use. Comprene?"

I breathed a silent prayer.

"Why shouldn't I repeat any phrase or word-group you use?" Walter asked, puzzlement plain even through voder.

"GODDAMMIT," I roared, but I was addressing only another roar of static. Groups with identical numbers of characters, in repeated sequence, were the only clue the Enemy computer had needed. It was "meaningful communication," so it was jammed.

One more standard band left on the list. If we had to hunt for each other on offbeat frequencies, it could take forever to establish contact. On the other hand, Cipher C was now useless, so there wasn't anything to do with the last

freak anyhow.

I scratched a telemetry contact and consulted Abacus Al. "How," I programmed, "can I communicate meaningful information without communicating meaningful information?"

That's the kind of question that makes most computers self-destruct, like an audio amplifier with no output connected. But Al is built to return whimsy with whimsy, and his sense of humor is as subtle as my own. "WRITE A POEM," he replied, "OR SING A SONG."



I snorted.

"No good," I punched. "Can't use words."

"HUM," Al pinned.

A nova went off in my skull.

I crosswired the microtape library in Al's belly to the radio in his rump, and had him activate the last standard frequency. It was live but silent: Walter had finally figured out his previous stupidity. He waited for me to come up with inspiration this time.

I keyed the opening bars of an ancient Beatles' song, "We Can Work It Out," in clear. And then killed it before the melody repeated.

A long silence, while Walter slowly worked it out in his thick head. Come on, dummy, I yelled in my head, give me something to work with!

And my headphones filled with the strains of the most poignant song from Cabaret: "Maybe This Time."

Thank God!

I keyed Al's stargate displays and thought hard. The chunk of sky I saw was useless unless I could learn what Walter was seeing over his own head—the two combined would give us a ballistic fix. I couldn't see the 'Hole, and I had to assume he couldn't either, or he'd have surely mentioned it already.

Or would he? Anyone with half a brain would have. . . .

I keyed in the early 21st-century Revivalist dirge, "Is There A Hole In Your Bucket?" and hoped he wouldn't think I was requesting a damage report.

He responded with the late 21st-century anti-Revivalist ballad, "The Sky Ain't Holy No More."

Okay, then. Back to the Beatles.

"Tell Me What You See."

Walter paused a long time, and at last gave up and sent the intro to Donald MacLean's Van Gogh song—the line that goes, "Starry, starry night. . . ." He was plainly stymied.

Hmmm. I'd have to think for both of us.

Inspiration came. I punched for a late 21st-century drugging-song called,—"Brother Have You Got Any Reds?" There were few prominent red stars in this galactic neighborhood—if any appeared in Walter's "window" it might help Al figure our positions.

His uptake was improving; the answer was immediate. Ellington's immortal: "I Ain't Got Nothin' But The Blues."

So much for that one.

I was stumped. I could think of no more leading questions to ask Walter with music. If he couldn't, for once, make his own mind start working in punny ways, we were both sunk. Any time now, real live Enemies might pop out of the 'Hole, and there was no way of telling what they were like, because no human had ever survived a meeting with them at that time. Come on, Walter.

And he floored me. The piece he selected almost eluded me, so obscure was it: an incredibly ancient children's jingle called, "The Bear Went Over The Mountain."

From our position—in quote, human space, unquote, the constellation known as The Great Bear is foreshortened to a small grouping. I studied the stargate feverishly, trying to visualize the geometry ("cosmometry"?—I lacked enough data to have Al do it for me. If Walter could see the Bear at all, it seemed to me. . . .

I sent the chorus of "Smack Dab In The Middle," the legendary Charles's version, and bopped Walter could sense the question mark.

Again, his answer baffled me momentarily—another Beatles song. *He loves me?* I thought wildly, and then I got it. "Yeah yeah yeah!"

My fingers tickled Abacus Al's keys, a ruby light blinked agreement, and Al's tactical assessment appeared on the display.

MARK ONE, it read.

"Walter," I yelled in clear, "Main drive. Now!"

And so when the live Enemies came through the 'Hole, we had the drop on them, which is how man got his first alien corpses to study, which is why we're (according to the government) winning the War these days. But the part of the whole episode that I remember best is when we were waiting there dead in space—in ambush—our remaining weaponry aimed at the 'Hole, and Walter was saying dazedly, "The most amazing thing is that the damned thing just sat there listening to us plot its destruction, with no more sense of self-preservation than the foresight of its programmers allowed. It just sat there. . . ."

He giggled—at least, from anyone else I'd have called that sound a giggle.

"... sat there the . . . the whole time. . . ."

He was definitely giggling now, and it must be racial instinct because he was doing it right.

"... the . . . the whole time just. . . ."

He lost control and began laughing out loud.

"Just taking notes," he whooped, and I dissolved into shuddering laughter

myself. Our mutual need for catharsis transformed his modest stinker into the grandest pun ever made, and we roared. Even Abacus Al blinked a few times.

"Walter," I cried, "I've got a feeling the rest of this bitch is going to be okay."

And then alarms were going off and we went smoothly into action as a unit, and the Enemy never had a chance.



WAITING AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT



SHORT STORY

Hurry up and wait —
a vision of a very dangerous future.

ROGER LOVIN

"Coojooctioo, fifty seconds."

"Mark it. Stand by, all boards." Sara's voice is calm and alert, for she is on both NervUp and BeCalm: it's the only way you can handle the job.

She sits at a console, in soft green light. Below, fanned around her, are six more consoles, six more figures hunched and poised. But relaxed, yes.

The room a bubble, a blister, an emerald-lit wart on a larger bubble—huge, silver, tumescent; the DallasPlex Ecodome. Four million souls living in the dome. It reaches half a kilo into the clanging brass sky, half a kilo into the blasted dirt, the bones of dinosaurs, the lost dreams of this life long ago, long ago. Thirty kilor around, the dome, and ringed with green, green, green. And beyond the green: guns.

"Status, board five." Sara calls her junior back from the tic which is beginning to oscillate his frame.

"Uh, sixty mods on nice south. Two goin' on, fifteen comin' off, three tranships for the O'Plex rail."

"The New OrleansPlex freight rail is numbered forty-seven. Citizen Brighton."

"Okay, Citizen Coordinator. Three tranships for rail forty-seven."

"Thank you, Wes." She watches his annoyance bring him back up. Will it be enough this time, the next time? Will she catch him if he falls?

Outside the dome, past the green, past the guns . . . the freight rails. A dozen of them coming in and radiating out of the dome, mostly from the east and north. Two south. One west. West into the brush and tumbleweeds and agonies of geology long past. West into the wild lands, the hidden lands, the lands of the Tribes. And eventually, Christ and the Apache willing, west into AngelesPlex to feed the six millions, to fuel their machines, to arm their guns, yes.

"Readout, all boards."

"Two meat wagons on rail twelve. Maybe got a botbox on the middle module."

"Fifty mods on the shuffle strip east-bound. Nothing shakin' here, boss-person."

"Break on rail thirteen. Two mods jamming, coming through LouisPlex."

Sara hits a switch. "Whoa down?"

"Thirty-three seconds, Coordinator."

"Put them on the shuffle strip, Libby."

"What'll we do with the oo-mods?"

"I'll move them." Sara is already punching data into the main bank. She feeds her stomach tighter. "Conjunction?"

"Twenty-one seconds. Twenty, oiocteen, eighteen . . ."

"That's a confirm on the hotbox, Coordinator."

"Break the floer. Put them on the dump strip."

"Live cattle, Ma'am."

"Dump them."

"Twelve, eleven, ten, nine . . ."

"Mark, all boards."

"Board one, clear."

"Clear on board two."

Sara feels the float of chemical hypertension as coojooctioo oarrows down on her. She detaches, mind and nerve endings coming free of the body, growing into the electrical synapses of the computer, eyes becoming an extension of cathode ray tubes staring greenly back at her, the pups on them moving at incredible velocities.

"Board six, clear."

"Conjunction, one second. Stand on it!"

Through the tinted window that walls one side of the control room, you can



see the rails. Steel arrows so straight the eyes ache. Elevated seven meters off the desert floor, humped by sonic breakers.

Without volition, Sara's eyes go to rail thirteen.

And it comes, the freightliner. Two thousand kilos per hour, half a million tons packed into sixty modules, all screaming in electric heat toward the Pecos, toward AngelesPlex, toward the dome . . .

And four more just like it, on four other rails, at the same instant. Hall Mary: please, not on my shift.

The entirety of DallasPlex feels it. From the waste processing tunnels to the Class One apartments up under the city's roof. Four trains slamming into the freight-yard switching terminal, moving so very, very fast. And if the computer doesn't drop a stitch, and if the Citizen Coordinator doesn't have a headache, and if her crew hasn't been too deeply into the pill bottles, and if for that two and a quarter seconds which count, everything goes exactly right . . .

All four trains flash out the other side of the dome and are gone in actinic stutter of light. Modules went on. Modules came off. Modules went from train to train. And two smashed into the million-liter water tanks designed to stop them and turned their mooring contents into jelly. But DallasPlex stands. Four million souls breathe again.

"Sara?"

She hlinks. "Sam. Hi."

The man rubs her shoulders and gentles her out of the control chair. "I got the hoard, kiddo. Go home."

She smiles her thanks and stretches, watching carefully as her relief takes command. How tense is he? Is that a tremble? Can he handle it? Abruptly, she is nauseated. The hell with it.

She small-talks her crew as they leave. Ho, ho, ho. See you tomorrow. How's the kid? Where are you going for your vacation? Why don't you all go to hell? Why don't we just let the damn trains do it sometime, huh? Why . . . Sara takes hold as she steps into the stink of general atmosphere. How long have they been promising to sweeten up the dome? She takes an elevator down to residential, knowing she can't handle the mob and shove of the escalators. In the dulled glint of the dropper's aluminum wall she sees a woman gray-haired at twenty-seven, the eyes too tight, the

mouth beginning to show the three years on the console. It's me, yes. It's me and I think I'll scream.

But she doesn't. She beats her way through the crowds on residential five, keeping to the walls, and clings to her door like a drowning sailor. She can't find the key and resorts to the huzzer.

"Hello?"

"It's me, Pie-Pie. Open up."

There is a five-year-old giggle through the speaker. "Me who?"

"Your mother, Cheryl. Come on, honey."

"What's the password?"

"Open the damned door!"

The door opens to reveal Chuck, her husband. He has a ladle in one hand and flour on his cheek. His look is accusatory, and he strides off without a word.

Sara bundles her child. "I'm sorry, Pie-Pie. I'm really sorry."

Cheryl refuses to be comforted and runs into her room, slamming the door. Sara goes to the kitchen as if dazed and sits at the table. Her breath comes hard. She watches Chuck stirring something on the stove. "I thought we were going out tonight?"

"I decided to cook." He is sullen.

"You didn't have to yell at the kid, you know."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry."

Please listen. Please let me just cry and roll up and not think. Please.

Chuck sets the table and brings a stew. "Cheryl ate." He spoons her bowl full. "You wouldn't believe the day I had today."

Please, my love. Not now. Please.

"First the goddamn ironhail in sector three blew out and started pouring heat all over a med lab, then the tech who went in to fix it fried himself on a live 220 and I had to go get him. Then . . ."

Sara stands before the mirror, looking at her naked body. Chuck's snores bounce off the bathroom walls in lumps. Is this all there is, she asks? Lie down, grunt, shower? What happened to Chuck the lover? Or is it what happened to Sara? It's not the body. One child, lots of exercise, good diet. She's still trim, her breasts still firm, the fat on the thighs fought to a standstill. What happened? Her hand toys with her husband's razor . . .

At 2:35 the telephone rings. Sara is awake instantly, even through the fog of leftover BeCalm. If it rings in the middle of the night, it's for her. No, no, no.

Please.

"Madam Coordinator?"

"Yes?"

"Please report to Western Sector Armoring Station, immediately."

"The Armoring Station? What's happened?"

"Report immediately."

Sara shifts in the accel chair, trying to find a position where neither her pistol nor her powerpak chafes her hip bones. Goddamn it to hell. Goddamn the Trihers. Goddamn the WatchBureau slug who let a liner get hijacked five hundred kilos into the Texas blackness. And goddamn the RailBureau ordinance that put a Coordinator in the militia. Hadn't she done her service at nineteen? Hadn't she fought the Second Corporate War up in Canada? Wasn't she entitled to a little goddamn peace without having to face the filthy, murdering Corporate dropouts in the ugly night?

"Stand by for acceleration."

Sara wills herself to relax. I'll stay on the mod. They won't need me.

Beside her, a young man flingers the butt of his pistol, whistling tunelessly through his teeth. "Get me an Apache," he croons. "Get me a Triher."

"Acceleration!"

The module jerks, sways and lurches forward, the hum of its motors rising to a whine as voltage pumps in. Sara is pressed into the seat as the mod's speed doubles, doubles again, then cubes. There are no ports on the mod: it's military and armored. But Sara knows the scene. The stubby capsule is running up the accel rail in a long sweep, leaning as the rail curves. Power boosts into the mod every hundred meters until the combined voltage is a fist in the engines. A kilo and an eighth from the loading platform, the accel strip joins the mail rail. By the time the module gets there it will be moving at a thousand kilos per hour. The powerpak grinds into her left hip.

The moon makes a black and silver nightmare of the landscape. Gargoyles crouch on boulders. Giants stand in the sage, thinly disguised as saguaro cactus.

On the rail, a liner lies like a broken-hacked snake, half its length tumbled to the stony ground. It has taken down several sonic breakers in its fall.

The armored module crawls out of the east, searchlights probing nervously. Gun turrets fore and aft swivel like skittish mares . . .

"Okay, first squad out! Perimeters at fifteen and thirty meters. Go!" The commander is efficient, masculine, and frightened. He turns to Sara. "Keep your people here until I give the signal."

"They're not my people. He's in charge."

"Okay, whoever. Y'all just stay put, right?"

The examination squad obediently stays put. The young man fingers his pistol and whistles. Sara wonders what it is like to be shot with an arrow. It might be over quickly. They say the Apache poison their arrows. Quickly, and peacefully. Chuck would see to Cheryl.

"Okay, out."

Sara takes her turn at the ladder, shocked by the sweetness of the night air. Is this what it was like before domes? Is this the pollution we crawled under aluminum to escape? The Green-Techs don't tell us how nice the air is out here.

"Get on the 'liner, dammit! Get your report together and let's get out of here."

The young man has his pistol out. "Where are th' Tribes? Just let a 'Pache show himself. I'll blow him clean to Nevada."

A woman ahead speaks. "Are you ready for war with the Tribes, son? Do you want to be the one who breaks treaty?"

"We didn't break it," the young man says hotly, pointing toward the wrecked 'liner.

"We don't know that the Tribes did this."

"It's proof enough for me. I'm ready for war." He looks around in the dimness, wearing his macho like a torch. "Any of you think a bunch of hippies and Mansonites with bows can take the Corporate States of America?"

"Not with bows, sonny," the older woman says. "But they could probably take us if they wanted to."

"Bull! What are you, some High Tech executive with all the answers?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Sorry, Ma'am."

"Just get in there and find out what caused this wreck."

Sara and the examination crew pour through and over the wreck, looking, looking. The military personnel crouch

in the cold of the coming dawn, shivering through their sweat.

At five-thirty, they find it. A module coupler had broken, dropped, and struck the rail. The following mod had pole-vaulted up the loose coupler and hit a breaker. And the railtrain had become junk. System malfunction. No Tribes interference.

"Bring in the perimeters! Get aboard, we're goin' in."

Dawn is full and already heating. Sara waits at the ladder, her arms filled with the wrecked 'liner's onboard recorder. The military commander stands at the foot of the ladder, still watchful. There are three soldiers, Sara, and himself still on the sand when the alarm sounds. "Down!"

All eyes follow the gun turrets. On a rise a quarter kilo distant are two figures.

The young man is in the mod's hatch, his pistol braced. "Apache bastards!"

"No!" Four people yell at once; all too late. The young man fires, and in the laser's whipcrack of coherent light, one of the figures on the rise puffs a burnt steam and collapses.

Almost simultaneously, the other figure raises something to its shoulder.

The military commander takes Sara's shoulders and flings her toward a boulder a few paces away. She stumbles into it knees-first and tumbles over.

There is a slight motion on the rise and a flash of something dark coming. The young man has time to fire once more before the arrow takes him in the throat. He staggers back into the armored module, knocking the radio operator off his seat. He spasms convulsively, his trigger finger pressing the laser pistol's firing mechanism again and again. The High-Tech woman is sliced in half. The forward end of the module bursts into flame. Then the young man falls and fires a last time. Upward, directly into the aft gun turret...

Painpainpain. Sara reaches convulsively for the readout board, her fingers scrabbling for shunt switches which keep eluding her. On the 'scopes, the pips come together and explode into whirling red light and high-pitched shriekings. No, not the shunt switches; pebbles. Gritted sand, not the console. But the shrieking is real, and it is herself. And the pain is real, and it is herself.

She silences in mid-shriek, not from

control but a sudden wash of warmth and pleasure through her body. Is she dying? She is on her stomach, awkwardly, in the dirt. She levers herself around—ohgod, ohgod—and looks down. One leg is... surely it belongs to someone else? Something else? She looks away peripherally, surveying her person as though from a fearful distance. The wash of pleasure is explained: her bowels have surrendered and continue to do so. Not like this, pleaseplease. Not without dignity. Still at a distance from her own wreckage, she hears herself begin screaming again.

Why not? No more console. No more stinking, crowded EcoDome. No more Chuck. No more equality with a vengeance.

There is a small explosion nearby. Sara clears, scans. Overhead, the military module hangs burning greasily. Will it fall? On me? Scattered around are charred bits of meat, some with smouldering uniform parts glued redly to them. Is she alone? Is she alone? Isn't there anyone left?

There is a period of jerkiness. The sun flits a degree of arc, then another. Five seconds unconscious? Five minutes? Do the blackouts get longer or shorter as you die/die/die/...

In a hostile situation, command devolves by rank on surviving combatants—tedum, tedum, something, something—Combatant in charge will act in accord with the military code of justice and the best interests of the Corporate States of America. Am I in charge? Am I a combatant? Am I waiting, waiting? Will the Cheerios Kid save the maiden, or will the Tribes arrive and find that burnt body up there and come down on us like a plague, knowing that they've got the food, and the patience, and the numbers, and the boldness, and the pain, obsweetjesus, the pain!

For a moment she is free of the piercing complaints of her ruined flesh as she transcends into nausea and vomits down the front of her uniform. No fucking dignity anywhere. She can stop it, she knows. The war. All she has to do is wait, be alive, keep breathing until either the Tribes or the army get here. Sworn live testimony, it says in the treaty. Big mistake, overanxious boy-soldiermilitia, notevenaprofessional. He's paid, we've paid, no war. Everything back to normal. Back to the console, back to Chuck, back to the Dome, yes.



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A soft, muffled *whump*. The armored module shifts, slides, teeters. Beacons of charcoal-colored smoke rise in the still morning air. Burning plastic drips down around Sara. Is it going to fall? Deus ex machina with a pie in the face? Is it over, the waiting? Sara lifts her arms, though whether in welcome or warding she cannot tell, and watches the ton weights of oblivion burning their way to imbalance over her head.

On the rise, a very small movement. Sara's concentration centers. Her hand moves in a gesture older than the gods

of the rocks and clutches her pistol.

A figure stirs, rises, walks haltingly toward the blackened lump of the dead Triher.

The other one, Sara's mind says reasonably. Of course. Apache? Hassayampa? Who was he originally? Some son of YorkPlex chasing his ideals into the wastelands, running from an identity tattoo and a life pledged to the Corporation? A loser from the sewers of now-dead PhilPlex, hearing the whispered switchblade nightmares of the Manzoniets and following them into red

fulfillment? What if it's him that's waiting when the others arrive? It's too fast, it's too fast!

The figure is still, poised, almost as though filled with helium. At this distance, Sara can see no more than a hooded cloak billowing, baggy pants tucked in kneeholes. But she knows she is seen, and studied, and her fingers tighten on her pistol.

The Triher bends and rummages among the dead warrior's remains, then stands holding a long, bulky object with a sling. Cautiously, silently, the Triher starts down the slope.

Maybe he won't kill me. Maybe I can go live with him, be his woman or slave. Breathe real air, herd goats and laugh in the sun. Maybe . . . She catches herself brushing her hair back, trying to sit up straighter, and laughs. Crusted with dirt and blood, voiding at all orifices: how can a one-legged woman herd anything? All she can do is wait . . .

In hostile situations . . .

If it's the Triher who survives . . .

The Triher is closer, passing under the rail. He lifts the slinged device.

Sara eases the pistol from its holster. No more Dome. No more Chuck. No more pressures.

The Triher halts, face lost in the hood, and raises a quick hand. And,

No more art. No more books. No more theater. And,

Sara raises the pistol and . . . fires.

The Triher staggers forward, fingers clutching spasmodically at the sling of the goatskin waterbag, and falls, nearly at Sara's feet. Long blond hair spills from beneath the hood. Already-glazing blue eyes look around frantically, as if trying to find something small and precious recently misplaced. The cloak falls open. Lemon-sized pubescent breasts, the nipples ringed, shudder once and are still.

Thirteen, Sara's mind computes? Eleven? She notes details with great interest while her fingers claw futilely at her own breasts. Worn boots. Ohgod-heaven she looks like Cheryl. Curious little silver huckle at the waist. Cheryl will look just like that in six or seven years, if only they wait. If only I wait. If only it waits/waits/waits/

Overhead, the module shifts slightly, patiently.



BOOKS

by Robert Silverberg

A WORLD OUT OF TIME, by Larry Niven, Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 242 pp., \$7.95.

This is the first of Larry Niven's novels, other than his collaborations with Jerry Pournelle, to appear as a hardcover original edition. First hardcover publication is ordinarily a major event in a writer's life, and—considering Niven's popularity with readers, his crowded shelf of Hugos and his excellent sales record in paperback—one might expect that his hardcover debut would bring us a book that is an event in itself. How surprising, then, to get this rambling, loose-jointed novel that seems to have assembled itself out of the handiest parts in the heap while its author's attention was elsewhere.

The plot, a doughy conflict-free assemblage of happenings, centers around one Jerome Branch Corbell. (Why the pun on James Branch Cabell, who was not at all like Niven's man? A good writer never makes unintentional or purposeless references of this kind.) who has died of cancer, goes into cryogenic storage, awakens several hundred years hence in someone else's body, and is almost at once sent forth on a galactic survey mission that takes him through a black hole and back to Earth of the remote future. (A writer with a sense of structure builds his novels around one extreme premise, not three.) Corbell's sojourn in the world of the near future is described perfunctorily; Niven does not give us the awakened sleeper's experience of alienation nearly as well as it was done in Fred Pohl's (otherwise quite dissimilar) novel *The Age of the Pussyfoot*, but no matter, because we are soon whisked away, sent off on a listless cruise to the galactic core, and hauled back quickly to a tour of the remote future that lacks specificity, vision, or inventiveness. And after a lengthy chase for a species of immortality, Corbell vanishes in a whiff of perfume, unchanged by the epic events of

the book and making no changes in us.

So the story is far beneath what we have come to expect from Niven. The writing, alas, is standard machine-made stuff, full of foolish magazine-level dialog on the order of, "What the bleep do you think you're doing," and slack, soggy exposition such as, "The chair would assume a fantastic variety of positions, and it gave indecently good massages." Corbell often thinks of himself in the third person italic—"No. *Jaybee Corbell is alive and well, if a trifle confused.*" Do you think like that? This is the stuff of magazine fiction, not of life. And readers eat it up—conditioning, I guess. The quality of Niven's perceptions is similarly thin. Corbell finds "soft mounds like a pair of falsies." Why not like a pair of breasts? Too often Niven accepts the first answer to any literary question.

And—most astounding of all—at the climax of the book Niven pulls the mighty planet Uraous, third most massive planet in the solar system, within two million miles of Earth. Niven, always ritually listed along with Hal Clement and Poul Anderson as one of the last hard-science writers, says not a word about the tidal disruption that would crumple our world like an omelet in a cement-mixer. I don't believe it. I don't believe anything about this book except that Larry Niven wrote it and Holt, Rinehart & Winston are publishing it with great fanfare, and I wish I didn't have to believe any of that.



SWORD OF THE DEMON, by Richard A. Lupoff. Harper & Row, 171 pp., \$7.95.

Behind the lurid title lurks a strange and austere beautiful fable that cuts across genre lines to offer rewards to a wide range of readers. Lupoff, a writer so original and self-willed that he has thus far failed to build much of a following—because each of his books is a unique and unclassifiable entity—may at last cohere an audience for his work with this remarkable distillation of Japanese myth, rich in ghostly combats, scenes of rare visual beauty, and a deep and intense verbal poetry. Imagine some strange amalgam of Lafcadio Hearn, E. R. Edisson, and Fritz Leiber, and you might get some notion of the flavor of *Sword of the Demon*; but it's unfair to Lupoff, actually, to attribute much derivative nature to this book.

Devotees of sword-and-sorcery fiction who pick the book up on account of its promisingly gory title and Lupoff's reputation as a biographer of Edgar Rice Burroughs are going to have problems with the opening few chapters. They constitute a difficult and forbidding prologue, abstract and remote in tone, which distances the reader deliberately from the action, leaving him adrift in a timeless and placeless land where all events are mysterious and causes seem divorced from effects. We are not participants in the early action of the novel, only observers, staring at grotesque tableaux on some bizarre Japanese scroll. But perseverance brings rewards: the mists clear, the characters take on identities, the classic archetypal elements of high fantasy appear. Though Lupoff maintains his cool and marvelously well-controlled tone throughout, and there is a total absence of mighty-thewed heroes and rampantly engorged adjectivity, there is enough swordplay, sorcery, conflict, passion, and imagery here to satisfy the most demanding devotee of Robert E. Howard or L. Sprague de Camp.

The simple plot needs little analysis. A woman named Kishimo finds herself in the midst of a struggle between demigods for power in the land of Tsuni; she is given tasks, embarks on a quest, falls in with potent companions, and is enmeshed in a series of mystic adventures leading ultimately to apotheosis. Along the way Lupoff's inventiveness is unflagging: a gorgeous (and gorgeously funny) battle with an eight-headed serpent that will wring cheers from the most impassive of readers, a samurai duel of wondrous ferocity, some magnificent monsters, mysterious hidden

kingdoms—a cornucopia of delights, described in a precise and elegant way. Lupoff taps some deep well of mythopoetic energy here. His knowledge of Japanese myth seems extensive, his manipulation of symbol is too skillful to be the product of mere calculation, and his guiding presence on this eerie journey is compelling and confident. This is adult fantasy at its highest level.

GONNA ROLL THE BONES, Fritz Leiber.

HARLAN ELLISON READS HARLAN ELLISON.

THEODORE STURGEON READS.
Alternate World Recordings, Inc., \$6.95 each.

Here are three of the first recordings in an ambitious new spoken-arts project that will eventually include virtually all of today's major science-fiction and fantasy writers reading their own works. We will never know how H.P. Lovecraft would have read "The Outsider" or what John W. Campbell's own dramatic reading of "Who Goes There" would be like; but here we have Leiber, Sturgeon, and Ellison down on vinyl, and other records of Le Guin, Bloch, Bradbury, Aldiss, Russ, Delany, and many more are in the works.

Of these three, the one offering the

most immediate delight is Ellison's disk. Harlan is an accomplished stage performer, a splendid comic and mimic, a man of extraordinary energy and warmth, and his is easily the most professional reading. He does his Hugo-winning classic, "Repent, Harlequin!" said the Ticktockman," with irresistible verve and contagious pleasure at his own virtuosity. On the other side Ellison presents a much less well known story, the somber fantasy "Shatterday," with equal skill. The record is a delicious souvenir of the Ellisonian platform technique—and the stories are worth repeated attention, besides.

Fritz Leiber comes from a family of professional actors, and is himself a man of such stature and presence that one expects his reading technique to combine the best of Orson Welles and Richard Burton. And so there is some letdown; for, although the famous Leiber voice is as resonant as ever, the intonations are bland, the climaxes are subdued, the hoped-for hard power is not there. I think *anyone* would sound subdued after Ellison, though, and Leiber's readings, while not the displays of verbal music that they might be, are authoritative and gripping. Most of the record is occupied by his robust fantasy, "Gonna Roll the Bones," which took a Hugo when it appeared in *Dangerous Visions* in 1967; a short *Fafhrd* and

Gray Mouser piece, "In the Witch's Tent," fills out the second side.

Theodore Sturgeon, like Leiber, is a man of great presence and personal magnetism. His reading, too, falls short of real acting skill, but no matter: Hollywood is full of actors, but we have only one Theodore Sturgeon, and his warm, quiet, captivating readings give us the man as well as the fiction. His record is a catchall: "Bianca's Hands," a very early fantasy, "The Hurtle is a Happy Beast," that jolly funny-critter story that helped to establish *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and a short, altogether Sturgesque extract from his as yet unpublished novel, *Godbody*.

These are important documents for anyone interested in the process of creating science fiction. By revealing the author's own sense of emphasis they lay bare structural secrets of three distinguished writers; and they provide some measure of permanence for voices that should not be lost. The records are available in specialty science-fiction bookshops, in some record stores, and by direct order from the producer (Alternate World Recordings, Inc., 148 East 74th St., New York, NY 10021). There is a fee of 75¢ for the first record, 25¢ thereafter, on such direct orders.

THE MEDIA SCENE

by
Charles N.
Brown



WAITING

It's an axiom of advertising that you don't spend money on unknown movies in order to make them known. You spend as much as possible on big movies instead, in order to make them bigger. As I write this, *King Kong* has just opened after a six-month advertising campaign which has been the biggest in history. In a reversal of the normal process, all of the spin-offs which normally follow a movie—dolls, games, tee shirts, etc.—have appeared before the movie opened. There have been articles in leading magazines and newspapers, books, interviews, publicity stunts. And just about everything else has been done in order to keep the movie in the public's eye. Theaters have had to guarantee \$150,000 net up front in order to show the picture. It seems to be working so far. In its first seventeen days, *King Kong* netted 15 million dollars—second

only to *Jaws*, the top picture to date. Even this might not be enough. The movie cost a reported twenty-four million dollars to make, which may or may not be an inflated studio figure (studios tend to underestimate small movies and overestimate major ones for publicity value). The break even point on a picture is a net of approximately 2½ times the cost—sixty million dollars in this case. *Kong* will have to be one of the ten top films of all time just to break even! For comparison, 2001, the most successful science fiction film of all time, netted nineteen million dollars in the United States. The U.S. figure is about half the total world figure. As for the movie itself, reviews have not been generally favorable. The special effects have been universally praised, but plot,

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A Fan's Notes

by Ginjer Buchanan

After, "Where do you get your ideas?", I suppose the question most often addressed to all authors is some variation upon, "How did your writing career begin?" A few years ago, two science fiction writers, Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison, addressed that question to a group of their peers. The responses were gathered together in a book titled *Hell's Cartographers* which was originally published in Britain and came out here in 1976, from Harper & Row.

In the book, Alfred Bester, Damon Knight, Fred Pohl, Bob Silverberg, and Mr. Aldiss and Mr. Harrison themselves discuss their involvement in the world of science fiction. It is fascinating material, full of interesting and valuable information, not only about the personal histories of the people involved but also about the history and development of the SF field in general. This information can be examined from many viewpoints. In terms of the history of the field, for instance, Algis Budrys, in a published review, focussed on how each man's account of his career demonstrates the important role played by John W. Campbell in the formation of modern science fiction. This is obviously true. Another thread that runs clearly through the book is the fact that every one of them was 'hooked' as an SF reader by his teens, if not before. Thus they were familiar with the conventions of the genre before attempting their own contributions.



But what particularly struck me was that four of the six writers represented were obviously active SF fans before they became professionals, and that, in truth, during their early careers the roles of writer and fan often overlapped greatly.

Two of them, Knight and Pohl, as contemporaries belonged to the same fan group in the '30s, a club called the Futurians, which also numbered among its members Cyril Kornbluth, Donald Wollheim, Doc Lowndes, Jim Blish, Judith Merrill and Virginia Kidd. Although Knight says that as an intellectual stance the Futurians looked down on fannish activities, their habitu-

al practices, such as naming their apartments (e.g. The Futurian Fortress), creating their own private religion (dedicated to the Ghod Ghul), putting out their own magazines, designing a Futurian crest, etc., can hardly be regarded as anything but unquestionably fannish.

Some twenty years later, when Harry Harrison broke into the field, many of these same people, along with just about any major author of the time that you'd care to name, were members of another group called the Hydra Club. It was, ostensibly, a professional organization but Harrison, who was at one point its president, indicates that a lot of its pro members were ex-fans who clung to their fannish ways. He describes himself, for instance, as "Harry, the fan . . . wallowing in a fannish dream of glory." Bob Silverberg too, at this time, was beginning to steadily sell professionally while continuing to edit his fanzine *Spaceship*, copies of which are now something of a collector's item. He also spent time hanging around with that other teenage fan-prodigy—Harlan Ellison.

After I finished *Hell's Cartographers*, I realized that I'd known all of this information before, mainly from fan history books, such as *All Our Yesterdays* and *A Wealth of Fable* by Harry Warner, Jr. and *The Eighth Stage of Fandom* by Bob Bloch. And from general knowledge. "Everybody knows" for example that Silverberg, Terry Carr, Ted White, Larry Shaw and Richard Lupoff were all members of a New York City fan club which took the name Fanoclats (as a portmanteau of fan and iconoclast), a club which still exists although the founding members are scattered far and wide. And "everybody knows" that Wilson Tucker, the writer, and Bob Tucker, the fan *par excellence*, are one and the same. It is this Bob Tucker, by the way, who has carried on through the years a friendly feud with the above-mentioned Bob Bloch (author of *Psycho* and other light classics) which is one of the honored traditions of fandom.



(Continued on P. 70)





The Spirit Was Willing

In the middle fifties when I came to New York, the Korean Conflict was pretty much finished. I had done my part by seeing to it that the state of Virginia was safe from North Koreans in quilted jackets.

In New York, as with any place else, it was necessary to earn a living so that one might greet whatever dawn would come with a certain degree of confi-

dence and the ability to pay a few bills, buy cans of chili beans and tamales and seek shelter from the soot.

I went out and looked for a job. In those days the idea wasn't as revolutionary as it seems today.

After much nonsense which I choose to forget, I was hired by a small commercial art studio as a "comp renderer" (one who does comprehensive drawings

on preliminary layouts), spot illustrator (one who . . . well, never mind) and general swamper. I was paid as much as was offered by unemployment insurance in those days.

The art studio, Hal-Ben Associates, did "piece work" for a larger firm named American Visuals. American Visuals was Will Eisner. Among other things, he produced booklets on any subject under the sun. For a few years I worked for Will Eisner, indirectly, by illustrating *The Farmers' Income-Tax* booklet, the *Toy Safety* booklet and countless others having to do with boating, building, buying, fixing, etc. And in the course of those years, I worked for and learned from Will Eisner. But I never met him. Any communication was through the studio owners or brisk, informative memos from Mr. Eisner such as, "Pay attention to the dummy, dummy!"

Will Eisner is hailed as a comic-strip pioneer, a visual innovator, and a genius in his field. But few have ever given him his due for the thing at which he excels.

Will Eisner was and remains a *story-teller*. Each line he draws, each action he delineates is not for style, flash or to impress you with his superb draftsmanship. Rather it is to tell a story, expose an idea, communicate a thought or a story line. And he does it as no one before or since has been able to do. When I worked for him, if my drawings did not communicate I heard about it. Emphatically. But I never met the man.

A few weeks ago in the offices of COSMOS after more than twenty years, I met Will Eisner for the first time. Will was illustrating a Tennis and a Golf calendar to be distributed by Baronet (who publishes what you're reading now). Curiously enough, he remembered all those little booklets so many years ago and the dummy who illustrated them. We hit it off like old friends and through a fortuitous set of circumstances (and Dave Hartwell's inspired idea), I swallowed my awe of this man who had long affected my life and my work and asked him to do something for COSMOS. He agreed to do it (a rare treat, I feel) and in the manner of the true professional he is (young artists take note), showed up more than a week before the deadline with what you see as our centerfold, *THE SPIRIT* reflecting on his various encounters with science fiction . . . among them reference to my favorite character, Awesome Belles.

So here it is, ready for framing (mind the staples), *THE SPIRIT* of Science Fiction. I think you'll enjoy it.

Thanks, Will.

J.G.

From The Publisher

I suppose that within the context of the science fiction genre, it would not be inappropriate to talk about the "launching" (may Harlan forgive me) of COSMOS. After all, there is a certain lexicon that is generally accredited to the language of the genre. So be it, COSMOS has been "launched," put to bed, delivered to the printer, published, finished . . . Not quite!

Certainly, the first issue of COSMOS, its editorials, its stories, its illustrations are now a matter of printed record and we hope of fond memory. We attempted to lavish the magazine with quality and diversity of talent, both in writing and illustration. We think we succeeded, we hope we have.

Included in that first issue were such gifted craftsmen as Fritz Leiber, Larry Niven, Michael Bishop and Frederik Pohl, whose imaginative stories were further enriched and brought to life by the graphic presentations of artists like George Schelling, Vincent DiFate, Preff and Rick Sternbach. Presented in a format immeasurably enhanced by the use of color reproduction, and designed to appeal to both the casual reader of science fiction as well as the rabid fan, COSMOS is the product of a small, devoted staff that cares, really cares. Cares about COSMOS, cares about the multitude of professional, creative people whose talents adorn its pages, and most especially cares about the COSMOS reader.

In truth, the launching of a new magazine is akin to childbirth. Both are fraught with deep-seated anxiety, grave anticipation, acute and lonely pain, a sense of rising excitement and the first shimmering light of parental pride.

When the newborn magazine first rears its head on publication day, the success of the birth is not so readily apparent as with human offspring. The magazine may look the way it was intended, but only after it endures the crucible of its readership, can we finally determine whether it is stillborn or whether it will go on through childhood, adolescence and eventual maturity.

When all is said and done, the magazine's survival depends on its ability to satisfy its intended audience sufficiently to whet its appetite for future issues. This is the real test, perhaps the only test of a magazine's vitality and longevity, and only time and the steadfast maintenance of an editorial posture that we believe in, will bring that satisfaction and will eventually decide the magazine's fate.

To this end and to this credo, we have tried to be true. We believe the first issue of COSMOS achieved that objective, and now issue number two continues on the course charted by its predecessor. Once again, crammed full of stories by some of the most creative and talented proponents of the genre, filled with innovative illustration in both black and white and color, and featuring the special "magazine within a magazine" for devoted fans, this issue is dedicated to all of you who are enraptured with the wonderful, magical, mystical world of science fiction and fantasy. For those of you who enjoyed COSMOS' first issue and for those of you who have discovered COSMOS for the first time, we hope this issue will do likewise.

Norman Goldfind

lettercolumn

Dear Mr. Hartwell,

"Hope springs eternal," Bartlett's Famous Quotations once said, truthfully if ungrammatically. COSMOS is an evident proof of this truism, appearing as it does in the wake of numerous recent failures. In only the last few years we've seen *If* disappear, *Galaxy* totter, *Amazing* and *Fantastic* doing an act *The Incredible Shrinking Man* would have been proud of, and *Vortex*, *Odyssey* and *Science Fiction Monthly* come and go. So what makes you think you've got what it takes (super distribution, great eye appeal, big names, good fiction, and DAMN GOOD LUCK)?

You don't appear to have very good distribution, at least in New York. I've only seen copies in Soho Books and the Science Fiction Shop. *Odyssey* had equally bad distribution here in the City, and I suspect that this was one of the factors that led to its demise.

As for eye appeal, if I hadn't once been shown a copy of this issue before seeing it for sale in Soho Books, I'd have passed the magazine by. At a little distance the colors of the amorphous mass turn to mud, with nothing distinguishable except the name, COSMOS. Without a moment's study, nothing in the cover stands out, not the names of the writers nor any details of the organic-looking building. I certainly hope there are a lot of studious casual or dedicated readers of SF walking around somewhere. If not, you in trouble, baas.

Maybe you should have had that Paul Lehr painting on the cover. Even though it, too, is a mass of color, it is neither muddy nor indistinct. It is, in fact, a lovely painting. And since Lehr's work, if not his name, is widely associated with SF, you'd probably sell more copies. (Printing it on that nice slick paper is probably costing you plenty, but please keep on, if you can.)

By the way, since I have the magazine open to that section, I'll go on a moment about the fan section. (I'm a fan, so don't take this too seriously.) I like the idea very much. You've got some good people in there, and I am especially looking forward to the fan art you intend to print, and to longer pieces by Ginger "Bear" Buchanan, who has shown such flair for anecdotal writing in fanzines. May I also suggest occasional reprints from fanzines, by the many good writers therein? You might narrow your choices by running material by Hugo or Fanzine Activity Achieve-

ment Award nominees, or by inviting suggestions from fan editors.

As for big names, you certainly have them. I was most impressed by Lynn Margulis. I've been following her work in *The Co-Evolution Quarterly*, her "Gaia Hypothesis" and her study of data from the Mars probes. Her article, an interesting one, filled in gaps in the rather sketchy background I've received from Lewis Thomas's *Lives of a Cell* (where Margulis is bright, Thomas is positively lyrical, a man drunk on love for those foreign bacteria in his body that have become his dear friends, the mitochondria).

But art, fan articles, and science articles do not a prozine make. (Unless you're *Algo!*) Your fiction is (I hope) the point of your magazine. Well, I was not impressed. "The concatenation of tiny bells" in Michael Bishop's story led to the revelation that the narrator was a total prosthesis and to my throwing COSMOS to the table for a few moments. I am sure that sometime I'll be able to pick the story up again, stop giggling about "The Six Million Dollar Man" and read, but not yet. Not yet.

And Frederik Pohl? "Rem the Rememberer" is a dread and dreadful little lecture. Pohl is an engaged consciousness, true; he has a message of importance, true; I agree with him completely about the danger we are in. But this story is all message and a yard wide, and the lecture starts in the second column. Couldn't he have included a little plot, or characterization or even a bit more description? As it stands, I say it's spinach and I say the hell with it.

I feel like brushing off my hands, saying "So much for COSMOS," and going out to play in the street. But, Mr. Hartwell, I have faith in your good taste and ingenuity. I expect you to exercise both of them, retaining what is good about COSMOS, finding better and better fiction, and connecting with that audience you believe you have waiting out there. Your success can only help and improve the field.

You have your assignment. Now get out there and DO IT. And if you fail, we will gladly acknowledge having known you.

But we'll claim we told you not to.

Yours with fervour,

JERRY KAUFMAN

Dear David:

Congratulations on a most promising first issue of COSMOS. You seem to have touched all the bases of the more traditional science fiction magazines—the solid science fiction of Michael Bishop, a good sword and sorcery serial by one of the two or three best writers in that genre, Fritz Leiber, some lighter short stories by Benford and Niven, and a couple of interesting pieces by unknowns, as well as an unusually interesting science article.

I'm particularly enthusiastic about the full magazine size, the interior color, the layout, and the features of the Center Section, particularly Bob Silverberg as book critic. I've been saying for years that there was room in magazine publishing at large for at least one full-sized, interior-color, truly first-class science fiction magazine aimed at and packaged for a wider readership than the old standbys. Well, COSMOS should give that theory a first-class testing, more so than the late lamented VERTEX did. If it's not a break-out success, then neither of us know what we're talking about.

One thing I say, though. I'd be careful about too much fan-oriented material, if I were you (which of course I'm not). Ginger's first piece is good, explaining the phenomenon briefly to those readers who have never heard of it, but I think it would be good to bear in mind that if COSMOS has the success it deserves, maybe 80% of its readership will never have heard of science fiction fandom, and at least half will not be interested.

Best of luck, and keep on truckin'.

Norman Spinrad

Dear David Hartwell,

Resounding congratulations to COSMOS! The positive things to say about the magazine pile up and overflow what can comfortably go into a letter. The stories are crisp, inventive, and felt—every one. The magazine shows that care and *claritas* were at work on every page. Color interior illustration has always been a dream of mine for an SF endeavor as long as I can remember. And here is the dream, made manifest in Schelling and Freff.

To give you a letter with nothing but praise wouldn't reflect the care you and staff have obviously put into the



A tale of tragedy and triumph by
one of the field's most talented young writers.

CAMERA OBSCURA

Thomas F. Monteleone



Like a flower blooming, the explosion unfolded as Lieberman focused through the lens.

He rotated the barrel, fingers moving automatically, quickly, to imprison a crystal-sharp image. Then a second, more violent eruption eclipsed the first. The air became a hammer, shattering him. Pieces of hot metal ripping, slashing at him. Lieberman felt the camera torn from his hands, white heat gouging at his eyes.

Pain.

And darkness.

Even his thoughts, graying into black. His last was of the shutter, and if there had been time to depress it.

His shivered body was taken to the Biotechnical Division of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, where they peeled back his flayed skin, aluminized the fractured bones, implanted skin-regenerative cultures, sealed the ruptured organs, closed the terrible wounds. Everything but the eyes.

Lifeless knots of nerve and jelly, their pathways were dark within his skull, leaving him blind and dancing with thoughts of death. For truly Lieberman was dead without his eyes—the most vital tools of his art. It was not like him to suffer so; he was not the fragile, sensitive martyr type. In an age of laser-imaging, holography, and light-sculpture, Lieberman had clung to old ways,

beating new prophets at their game. His desire had been as fierce as a desert wind, his energy like the sun, and he had burned himself a place among the past masters: Szleglitz, Weston, Adams, Cartier-Bresson, and now—Lieberman. From the beginning, his work had spoken eloquently of a medium without the machine. His prints were more than mere two-dimensional phantoms. His visions, his images, screamed a challenge to the New Arts, humbling them with multiversals, impossible colors, compositions delicate yet outrageous, and technique as intelligent as it was avant. There was no aspect of the art which Lieberman had indulged and then found not wanting. He had broken all the rules by establishing new ones; his work sang his message to the critics with all the subtlety of a Beethoven symphony.

Their labels annoyed him: Classicist, Recidivist, Neo-Romantic. They wished to confine him by defining him, to impale him like the dry husk of a butterfly beneath a pin. But Lieberman would not be captured so easily.

As he became familiar with the new sight organs, doubts shimmered like specters only half-perceived. Something seemed to be lingering just beyond the periphery of Lieberman's new vision. Something different. Something changed.

But when he searched it out, he found nothing but his fear.

He learned to ignore this as he gained mastery over the machine parts, as the scars healed and his strength returned. The time had finally come when he allowed Elise to see him. He hoped she had not minded the exclusion, since their relationship had always been an honest one. He hoped she would know that there was part of him—call it vanity, fear, or whatever you wish—that could not let her see him disfigured or in pain.

It was a sun-bright morning when she came to him. The door opening quickly and she suddenly appeared: an auburn splash of hair framing an oval face, eyes of polished serpentine, Celtic nose over slightly pouting lips. She smiled as she touched him with pale, almost translucent hands, delicately veined like Carrara marble. He kissed her, held her close. They talked and he was comfortable and serene—save the interrupting moments when the servos hummed, when his gaze danced about her as she

spoke.

Looking at her, he remembered. She had been one of his first models, and his only lover. She had been the final interlocking piece in the creative puzzle; after Elise, Lieberman had begun his rise. Of all the women he had since photographed, he had wanted none of them, no matter how fervently they had forced themselves upon him. Once immersed within his art and his love, Lieberman's passion flourished somewhere beyond, or perhaps on a parallel path with, the needs of the flesh. Elise knew this, admired it. Both of them were happy with it.

He was neither surprised nor disappointed when she asked: "When do we get back to work?"

"We already have," he said, smiling.

He spent the drive through Washington studying the familiar landmarks, calling back remembered images, comparing them to new machine-constructs. His mind was on these things when they arrived at their townhouse in fashionable Georgetown, and he barely perceived her mention of the surprise.

"Surprise? For what?" he said as he palmed the lock and entered the foyer.

"For you, silly. You know—'welcome home' and all that." She laughed and guided him down the hall. "It's in the den. Go on. Look."

Lieberman walked slowly down the corridor which was dark save a solitary scone at its midpoint. A humming within his head spoke of the changed illumination and the automatic adjustment to it.

And so he ignored them, even as he accepted their money and their praise. While the light-sculptors and holographists struggled through commercial hack-work, Lieberman created what and where he chose. His corporation, Image Design Unlimited, became preferred stock on the Exchange, as much for its status appeal among the affluent as its financial stability. Lieberman had become that rarest of all creatures: an artist, recognized within his own lifetime.

But now he lay in darkness, reliving his Promethean past, shuddering at the thought of his dark future. He had always hated sleep, and so it was doubly ironic that he now live in the half-world of the sleeper. To awake from dreamless oblivion, to feel his eyelids flutter, spring open, greet nothingness, was a

chilling thing. *Deja vu* struck him like a solitary musical note; as if he had breathed the darkness in retreating dreams.

In time, the doctors brought him hope. He would receive new eyes. Prosthetic optics were not yet commonplace, but working models were in operation, with new designs and modifications emerging from the labs steadily. Lieberman was scheduled to receive one of the latest prototypes, and this was a great comfort to him. But he did not think much about the new eyes, or the day when he would see again. He had discovered an unknown side of his nature while blind: an inclination to self-pity, a pleasure in feeling sorry for himself. It was from this feeling that he kept Elise from seeing him. By denying himself her presence and her love was he more fully able to suffer.

Days passed, however, and the new eyes were brought to him.

Despite the local anesthetics, Lieberman felt the doctors probing, calibrating, anchoring the things to his hollow sockets; he heard their monotonic voices coach and comment upon the operation. What he received was the result of years of careful design and testing: two monolithic microprocessors, grafted to the optic nerves by Soviet myoelectric synapses, which accepted information through laser-encoded lenses. As a cosmetic concession, he received fully-orbiting coverings that glistened like natural eyes. Tiny sensors and servo-motors moved them, once he had "learned" how to control them. Each time he shifted his gaze or the iris changed diameter, Lieberman heard the resonant hum of the servos within his skull.

At last, when the adjustments were at an end, the final tunings made, the circuits tested and the switches thrown, did Lieberman see. His brain whited-out as he fought to interpret the rush of information. Slowly the light coalesced, quieted, assumed familiar configurations: substance, depth of field, shadow. There were three people, dressed in white, standing over his bed—a woman and two men—all smiling with self-satisfaction. He responded to their questions, asked his own, cooperated with their tests. Yes, everything seemed right. Clarity, resolution, even color was as it should be, as he had recalled it in the dark dreamtimes, and before this

accident at the Solar Furnace Exposition. Blinking his eyes, he felt moisture at their corners; they had retained his lacrymal ducts. The eyes washed and lubricated although they required neither.

A Tiffany lamp bathed the den in soft yellows, orange, magenta, complementing the warm tones of the Persian rug and the barn-wood walls. On his desk sat a large package in white paper, dressed in a green satin bow. "What is it?" he asked, playing the ritual game of picking it up, hefting it, before tearing away the poorly wrapped paper (Elise was never very good at such things). Underneath lay a freight cube, bearing the stamps of overseas customs inspection. Lieberman pulled at the scaling tab, and excelsior flooded out and into his hands. He opened the package slowly now, respecting the exquisite European care with which the object had been packed, until he could lift the gift from its wrappings.

"My God, it's beautiful," he said, staring at the camera he now held in his hands. "Where'd you ever find it?"

Elise answered him, but he did not record the answer—so intensely did he examine the prize. It was a masterpiece of craft and design, form and function. More than thirty centimeters on a side, hand-rubbed rosewood body, black fabric bellows on delicately oiled tracks. Across the top, he read the manufacturer's name: *DEARDORF*. His fingers touched the black metal which encircled the camera's great lens—a gently convex dome of hand-ground glass. In white letters, rimming the lens, were the words *SCHEIDER-KREUTZNACH*, maker of the most perfect optics ever produced. A more perfect camera had never been designed, and there were but a handful left throughout the world. Lieberman held it carefully with both hands, walked across the room, and selected a large sturdy tripod.

"It'd been looking for it a long time," she said as he flitted the pod to the camera's brass bottom-mount. "Long before the . . . the accident. It was just luck that it came when it did."

"It's really beautiful," he said, standing up, taking her hand and drawing her close. He kissed her once. "Like you. Thank you very much."

She kissed him with her eyes closed, but he kept his own open, studying the close-up detail of her long lashes and

trembling lids.

"Here," he said, stepping back to pick up a focusing cloth—a large black rectangle of opaque fabric. "Let me look at you." The cloth was a relic from another age, but it was necessary to appreciate the crystalline perfection of the Deardorf.

Elise sat in a Regency chair by the balcony window-doors. Sunlight seeped through, became entangled in her hair like the corona of an eclipse. Her lime-green body-shift clung approvingly to her.

Across the room, Lieberman positioned the camera and threw the black cloth over his head. Beneath the shroud, darkness clutched at him as the eyes hummed their adjustments. He tensed, for a moment, against the sudden blackness. Then, fingers groping for the catch on the rear panel, he swung it down to reveal the image on the ground glass. He blinked his eyes to see—

—a view from a great height. Looking down upon a murky sea burned by a blue-white sun, where rolling mist boiled off into hot, still air. The sky was a metallic gray, and—

—stumbling back, Lieberman threw off the cloth which seemed to be clinging to him like some live thing, choking him. His eyes refocused on the warmly lit room, quietly posed Elise.

"What's the matter?" she said, reading his confused expression. She rushed to him. "Frederick, what's wrong? Are you all right?"

He waved his hand. "Yes, yes. It's okay. It's nothing. Just got dizzy for a minute there. I'm all right now. Go on, now. Please, sit down."

Frowning, Elise obeyed him.

Lieberman tented himself in the shroud, forcing his eyes to the ground glass where—

—something dark, indistinct, moved across the surface of the water, sending out a wake of endless V's. The alien sun flared above the edge of shoreline trees, but there was no strong illumination. Everything bathed in shadow-light: a coldness, suggesting dampness, decay. He panned with the camera, across the sea to a sheer-walled cliff. Something dark fluttered past the lens, and he flinched. Some flying thing. It's after-image flickered in his mind. Almost familiar, oddly terrifying, as it lingered on the edge of memory. Twisting the lens, he attempted more resolution, the

metal growing slippery in his hand—

"Frederick?" Elise touched his shoulder.

He backed out of the cloth, stood up, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, stared at her blankly.

"What's the matter with you?" Her voice was keen-edged; she sensed a terror within him.

Lieberman rubbed his false eyes, out of habit, more than need. "I don't know. I don't know." Moving back from the camera, he pointed to it. "Look in there. Tell me what you see."

Elise slipped beneath the focusing cloth, remained there as she spoke. "What am I supposed to see? The chair. The window . . ."

"What about the water? Don't you see the water?"

"Water?" She dropped the cloth, looked at him. "Frederick—"

He pushed her out of the way, peered through the ground glass where the image danced, saw the ripples of the dark sea. "Elise look at it! I'm not crazy! Look!"

But she saw nothing.

Gently she explained to him, listened to him. She was afraid for him, but not of him. Lieberman turned her off, not hearing her words as soon as it was clear that only he could see it. Looking again he saw subliminal movements across the water. Almost hypnotic, its effect upon him, until he forced himself away from it, to join Elise on the couch.

Lieberman lit a cigarette, his sweaty hands staining the paper. "Oh God, this is crazy! What's happening to me?"

She could taste the desperation in his words, the fear. "What do you see?" She whispered the words.

"You'd believe me, wouldn't you?"

She nodded, because she could not speak.

He inhaled, exhaled slowly, closed his eyes. Slowly, he described what he had seen.

Elise looked at the camera. "I don't understand . . . I'm sorry, but—"

He was not listening. Suddenly he rose and left the room in silence. She was afraid to follow him, but felt she must. While she wrestled with her indecision, he returned with an armful of 8 x 10 sheet film already sealed in lightproof holders. He walked past her, covered himself with the cloth, adjusted the lens, then slipped the film into its place before the ground glass. He cocked the shutter release, then pressed

it. Withdrawing the film, he inserted another, swiveled the camera thirty degrees, exposed the film. Elise watched him take three more exposures, before he gathered them up and departed for the developing lab in the cellar.

Lieberman was baffled when the prints did not reveal the world of the lens. He tried more shots, moving the camera about the room, to the balcony, different rooms. More exposures but the same results. There was no way to prove to her what he saw. Twice, he had seen a shape moving across the oily sea—an ill-defined thing that raised the hackles on the back of his neck. If only he could pin it down, *photograph it*.

Experimenting through the long hours of evening, he inspected his other cameras, all the antique collection pieces. But there was nothing odd within them. Only the Deardorf peered into madness, as if it were the only window into nightmare: *where great green oceans of Jurassiclike forests lay shimmering. Corridors cut through giant ferns and ginkgoes—paths worn smooth by light-years of reptilian traffic. Tall towers of carved milk-glass rose above the swampy lowlands, their shapes suggesting the interlocking complexity of Oriental puzzle-boxes. Things moving past the lens, so close as to be a blur or so distant as to be only a speck. But within the green shadows he saw them: hunched, long-legged things with burning eyes and saw-tooth mouths. Small grasping forelimbs carrying what could only be tools or weapons. Out of nightmare, these saurian things appeared, working the gem-cut cities and primitive screaming forests.*

"It must be the camera," he said over breakfast with Elise. Sunlight streamed through bottleglass windows. Bacon crackled in a wrought-iron pan. "There's something about the Deardorf . . ."

"And you," she said. "Maybe you. Your . . . eyes."

"I've thought of that too. But how?" "Maybe we should call NIH?" she asked as she poured more coffee.

"No, not yet. I don't want them prying. No proof yet. If there was only some way to get a picture of that place. Elise, you should see it! What prints I could make!"

"You're way behind in your work, Frederick. The commissions by the Canadian Embassy are already paid for.

Biochemcorp wants the proofs from the—"

"They'll have to wait." He cut her off abruptly, consumed as he was with his own thoughts, not aware that he was hurting her.

And they did wait. Weeks were wasted as Lieberman carried the Deardorf about the city, peering into the other world from every possible vantage point. He became familiar with it, but could do little else. It was his private vision, and could share it with no audience.

In the evenings he sat alone in the den watching the camera which sat on long legs like a great one-eyed insect. The servos hummed inside his head with each glance, reminding him each time that perhaps it was he that was the bridge between the worlds. Or perhaps a singular combination of the lens and his prosthetics. Thoughts of it obsessed him, so fascinated was he by that place where reptiles carried the twin-edged blade of intelligence, where man remained a wide-eyed tarsier-thing. His time and his creative energies were sapped by the mystery, and part of him wanted to give it up, to return to his past life. How much easier it would be to attribute the other place to imagination, to consign it to that world where all men indulge their private fantasies. But as he lay in the darkness, when the house was silent save the breathing-sleep of Elise beside him, the visions through the lens would haunt him, call to him like Sirens, would not leave him even in his dreams.

The days melted into weeks, becoming a meaningless smear of time. Elise managed the affairs of Image Design, while he attempted new routes to a solution. He consulted libraries, wading through works of physics, optics, electronics. Nowhere was there a key. Nothing.

When he attempted his old work, he felt cut adrift and lifeless. There was no longer magic in his work; the trademarks of his art faded into pale phantoms of earlier genius. The cameras had become cold, alien things to him; his hands groped about them unsteadily, unsurely. Color and imagination were lost within him, even in his industrial work, where now he produced only studied clichés, crude pastiches of earlier triumphs. His critics and his clients sensed the difference in him, although they could not articulate any particular

problem.

But they felt just the same. Something was wrong with Frederick Lieberman.

And he knew it himself, which made it worse. It was an agonizing thing for an artist to feel that he could no longer create. In one respect, though, Lieberman's pain was more localized, more defined than with others. In most, they wake up one morning and find that the spark is gone, the Muse has moved on to touch another, leaving them alone with their thoughts. At least Lieberman knew where the beast lay: in the corner of the den on three legs, one eye mocking him.

Finally, he gave himself to Elise and she absorbed his pain and his words, trying to understand him, to love him. She convinced him to return to NIH so that the doctors might help him. They had discussed it into the quiet darkness of many nights, until, exhausted, Lieberman gave in.

She drove him to the Bethesda complex where they questioned him, tested him, monitored his body responses, telemetered his cyborg parts. Then they questioned him again, disassembled him, reassembled, retested, and then all over again. His pain, whereas it had only been psychological before, became physical as well. Old wounds were reopened and the demons entombed there were loosed again.

When it was over, completely over, she came to see him in his white room.

"Frederick, I love you," she began, ready to slip quietly into the speech she had prepared on the drive up from the city.

"Love isn't enough now," he said, looking away from her, focusing on a nondescript spot on the nondescript far wall. His skull hummed to itself.

"Don't say that," she said.

"Didn't they tell you what they think? The 'doctors', I mean."

She shook her head, forcing herself to look at the man who had once been so confident, arrogant in his creating. "No, I haven't talked to anybody. I came right up here."

"They don't believe me, Elise. They've taken the Deardorf apart and put it back together. Did the same with me. Built mock-ups of my eyes, hooked them to the camera. Nothing. There's nothing there."

"When they called, they said you can come home now."

"Home? What for? There's nothing left for me there." He picked up a

newsfax from the bedstand. "Did you see McCauley's column? 'The Lost Art of Lieberman' he calls it. Shit! How the hell did those cretins find out about this!"

"Frederick, you've got to forget all this. Start new things again. I can't keep things going forever. Image needs you. I need you."

"Don't you understand what it's like to see something, to know that it's there, and not be able to touch it. There's a whole world of new material. A world, Elise! And I can't make it real."

"They said you can come home now."

"You're not listening to me."

"I can listen better at home."

"All right. Tell them I'm ready."

But he was not ready.

Elise brought him home and he retreated to the false womb of his office and den. The walls surrounded him in a tasteful blend of bookcases and paneling where his finest prints were hung in chrome frames and nonglare glass. Rows of reference works stared at him; the names on the spines glowed iridescently—Feininger, Haas, Porter, Cosindas, Avedon. On the opposite wall stood smoked Plexiglas cabinets, their shelves holding cameras of past ages. Lieberman looked at them, their lenses staring like the eyes of caged, cyclopean beasts. The closed door was covered by a giant self-portrait: curly black hair, backlit to effect an aura of brilliance, high forehead, bright eyes that were also dark obsidian wells, a wry smile twisted slightly to the left of the thin face. Lieberman stepped back from the sneering image as its eyes followed him. He looked away from it, then back again. Again the obscene bum of the servos. He rubbed his temples, squeezed shut his eyes, to banish the sound. The print watched, smiled broadly as the lips parted and formed silent laughter.

Lieberman looked at it, ran to the door and ripped the matted portrait down from its architectural-pin moorings, splitting it down the middle with rough motions. The paper groaned as he destroyed it, but Lieberman was not appeased. Turning, he was captured by the chrome-frame prints. Near the upper left corner was his first "Best of Show"—a wide-angle close-up of an American Indian. Shot with UV film and printed on Kolorlith, the creased face was star-

ing at him.

"You stole my soul," it said to him.

"No!" he dropped the ripped self-portrait, backed against the bookcases.

Another print, a multi-image of a child's face locked within a cut diamond, moved and spoke: "It's cold here. Where you left me."

Below it, a print of Elise. She stood naked in knee-deep water while infrared highlighted beads of moisture upon her perfect skin. She leaned forward, out of the picture, called out to him: "The light, Frederick. The light is dying, and something . . . is killing me."

Now the entire gallery was dissolving, moving, changing into grotesque parodies of themselves. Their voices, murmuring, rose up like the crash of surf on a midnight beach. Their words a roaring sussuration, cicada cries which he could not understand. But he could feel the mocking tones of hate, inflections of disgust.

Staggering, he reached his desk and his hand fell upon a marble paperweight. It was a platinum medallion from the New York School of Visual Arts. The weight in his hand gave him a sense of power, strength; he hurled it across the room, striking a portrait of Elise. Glass shattered into diamond fragments, and the gallery screamed. Amid their wailing, he attacked them, ripping their matted images from the wall, sending them across the room. A chrome-edged frame struck the Plexiglas cabinet, splintering it open, pushing a shelf of old cameras into a heap. One of them, a bellows Graflex, fell to the floor, and Lieberman picked it up, fired it through the bottleglass panes of the balcony doors. Then he embraced the cabinet, uprooting it, heaving it over in a thunderous crash.

Through the wreckage, he noticed movement. The door had opened and Elise stood framed by its sill. Her agate-eyes aflame. Shock and disbelief.

"Frederick! Oh God! Stop it!"

"It's over, Elise. All over! They won't hurt me anymore. They can't—"

"Frederick, what happened to you? I've got to get help . . ." turned to leave, and he leaped across the room, grabbing her thin wrist.

"No! You can't leave. You pushed me into this. You and that goddamned camera! You can't leave now."

"Let go of me! I didn't do anything to hurt you. Please!"

Lieberman looked into her eyes and

he adjusted for the extreme close-up, humming. The sound reminded him. She was right; she was not to blame. He rubbed at his temples, feeling for the servos implanted there, just beyond the thin wall of bone. He stood, wavering, thinking, only vaguely aware that she had broken free of him and was running down the stairs to the street level. But that did not matter now; he was concerned with what he had become, what they had made of him.

He walked away from the broken pieces of his life, turned to face the dead-end in the corner. The lens faced him like the barrel of a weapon, and he thought of the world seen through its glass. The place of steaming mist and reptilian shapes—symbols of man's underside, his evil—stalking where man should have been. Why had he seen it so? If it was not real, then what did it mean? Was it, in its own perverse way, art?

The answers lie within, he thought, wiping sweat from his face. They lie twisted and trapped among the micro-circuits between his brain and the metal eyes. To know was to untangle that mass of flesh and steel.

Pushing through the broken balcony doors, he stood upon a small platform, felt the filigree of the railing bite into his thighs, his groin. Moonlight scampered across the river's surface; high-rise lights from the Virginia side punctured the sky, washing out the stars. Servos hummed as he stared out into the night. Lightly he touched bands to his cheeks, felt their clammy coldness. His fingers slipped upward until he reached the synthetic hemispheres—alien and cold. He ripped them out to reveal the machinery in dark sockets.

Oddly, there was no pain. The nerve endings had been cauterized long ago, his anguish extinguished. Lieberman forced his fingertips between the orbit and the lenses, digging his nails into the brittle alloy shells, touching the tiny harnesses of wire filaments. He pulled delicately at first, like a surgeon, dislodging the hooks and metal anchors in the remaining strips of tiny muscle fiber. Then more violently. Stroboscopic pulses of purple, orange, brilliant yellow flickered at the threshold of his brain, wiping out the sparkling Potomac. Metal fell away from flesh, circuits shorted out, myoelectrics cracked, sizzled. Pain probed beyond his fingers.

A spasm jerked his hands away from

empty sockets, and pieces of wire and machine cascaded down his cheeks. The December night was freezing fast, and a cold, cruel wind whipped through his eyeless skull, underlining the darkness there. Lieberman considered the distance between him and the street below. It would be so simple to end it now, to just lean forward, to change the balance point by a few centimeters and feel the cool rush of night before impact, before the end.

Seconds ticked off inside his head as he courted death, but he wavered, now that his fury was spent, knowing that he could not kill himself.

Blindly, wrapped in a darkness that was somehow more comforting than terrifying, he staggered back from the railing, felt his way past broken panes, and into the room. Lieberman felt an odd calm descend upon him. He knew it now: when he had lost his real eyes, he had lost his true artistic vision, and the replacement eyes would never restore that lost personal vision of the world. It mattered little now whether the other place had been real or imagined. Perhaps it was, as the doctors had implied, a construct of a traumatized unconscious.

Lieberman found a chair, amid the room's rubble, groped his way into it. He collapsed, shoulders slumping forward, forehead in his hands. He knew that the unconscious was the crucible where his creations had been forged—a wellspring of desire and fear. It was probably true, then, that his othermind, that secret mind-place, had known from the beginning what he only now accepted.

He had been given back a functional view of the world, and found that it was not enough. That message had been locked within that German piece of glass, although Lieberman knew that the camera had only been a catalyst, a focal point for his unspoken fears. It was true, just as he had often read, that the Fates are sometimes cruel to those who seek their Muse. But there would be no more machine-eyes. If he could not see as an artist, he chose not to see at all.

The night wind whispered through the room and he sat, passing silent time, until he heard footsteps on the stairs. "In there," he heard Elise's voice.

Footsteps crossing the threshold, muffled by the carpeting. "Frederick . . . are you all right? I brought Mr. Dillon, from next door. He—"

He heard them coming closer as she spoke, and slowly he lifted his head from his concealing hands, letting the lamplight touch his empty sockets, stained by tears. He heard Elise scream, heard the sound melt into a whimpering cry. He heard his neighbor choke, and mutter a quick *ohmigod!* He heard Elise saying his name over and over.

Mr. Dillon stepped back towards the door, said something about an ambulance, and was gone.

"I'm sorry," said Lieberman, after a silence returned to the room. "I'm sorry it was like this."

"Why, Frederick? Why?"

"Could you love a blind man, Elise?" He dropped his head, suddenly aware of how horrible he must look to her.

"What do you mean?" Her voice was shot through with pain.

"Could you love me if . . . if I stay like this?"

"I do love you," she spoke the words strongly and he felt something spark within his chest. "But why like this?"

He reached out in the blackness for her hand, and found it grasping quickly for his own. He drew her close, smelling her hair upon his cheek. "Understanding comes slowly, Elise. I'll explain it all, but not right now. I've just learned it myself."

And she held him close upon her breast, struggling to know this new aspect of his inner self. He would one day tell her that there was no artistic machine but man. And for a man like Frederick Lieberman, there were no replaceable parts.

Someday he would tell her this, and she would understand.

But not tonight.



NOVELLA



GORDON R.
DICKSON

A fast-paced novella in Dickson's Time Storm series.

MONAD GESTALT



From the first moment in which we acquired him and his four men, it was obvious that Tek was interested in the girl. I could not really complain about that. Marie, who was the only other adult female in our party of four adults and one child, obviously belonged to me. While the girl made an obvious point of belonging to nobody, unless you counted her as belonging to Sunday; and the crazy leopard really cared for nobody but me, no matter how the girl lavished her silent attentions on him.

It was therefore a tricky situation. The girl was adult only in the sexual sense; although now that she was beginning to talk a little it was obvious she was some years older than the thirteen or fourteen I had taken her for when Sunday and I had first found her, all skin and bones and dirt, refusing to answer or be touched, by the side of the road some months ago. But I was still willing to bet she was less than ten years older than Wendy, Marie's daughter; and Tek's attentions to her were not welcome—from my standpoint, at least.

It hurt me, therefore—though, of course, I did not show it—that she seemed to put up with him well enough. She was easily as responsive to him as she was to me; and Sunday and I had been the only living things in the world for her during those first few months of dodging mistwalls and surviving on the raft of the lizard people, adrift on some future version of the prehistoric Great Nebraska Sea. If I had not literally saved her life during those months, I had at least kept her alive and cared for her. I did not really expect gratitude, I told myself, but some distinction made on her part between Tek and myself would have been appreciated.

Of course, having thought that, I kicked myself mentally. I had not been four years old before I learned that love is an illusion between human beings, even the highly-touted love between mother and child. When my own mother finally abandoned my sister and myself, I was already quite prepared to see the last of her. I ought to have been the last person in the world to expect the girl to be moved by anything but her normal individual, selfish interests.

So I put out of my mind any worry about the girl and Tek, only recruiting Bill Gault to join me in watching to see

that neither Tek nor any of his four men dragged her off into the bushes as we pushed across country.

This was easy enough to do, since we were still keeping a sharp eye on all five of these latest companions of ours. I had finally allowed Tek to carry a rifle, but on condition he stayed away from the other men; and Marie had one of her gag of trained dogs on watch-and-guard duty on all five of them at all times.

Fourteen days after our group had come to its full size, we were riding in a sort of motorcade, all of us including the dogs. Our vehicles consisted of a couple of brand-new motor homes for sleeping and living quarters, preceded by a couple of jeep carryalls and followed by a pickup truck, all three smaller vehicles with four-wheel drive, carrying the armed members of the party while we were on the move. With wheels under us, outflanking the moving mistwalls became not only easier, but more certain. We were very careful, indeed, to outflank them. It was one thing to go through the stationary mistwalls as I had begun to do now, with Bill to help me—and through the lines of time-change they announced. It was another thing to be caught with the landscape around us changed—either forward or back in time without knowing which, or how many years of change—whether we wanted to be or not. The crazy cat, Sunday—as well as the girl and myself—were living evidence of what the moving lines of time-change could do to your mind—if not your body.

Even with the stationary mistwalls, we did not go into them as blindly as I had gone into earlier ones. We would make all the tests on them that Bill could think of, first. Among his designs were rod or rope devices to be thrown or pushed through the mistwall and dragged back, to give us an idea of the ground situation and atmosphere beyond. The third time we used them, what we learned kept us from walking off a cliff on the far side of the mistwall before we would have had a chance to open our eyes. But, in the end, in almost every instance, we still had to go through personally.

We found a number of different situations, from raw desert to empty city, on the far sides of these walls; and we profited from what we found. The plan Bill and I had evolved was based on our

theory that our best chance to get on top of the time-storm was to keep looking for the most advanced future segment we could find. Hopefully, the more advanced an area we could hit, the more likely we were to find the equipment or the people to help us deal with the time-storm. If we were going to be able to do something about it, that was where we were most likely to find the means. If we were to be forced to live with it—perhaps we could find the techniques and patterns we needed in something beyond our present time slot.

As I had discovered earlier, however, the time changes seemed to be weighted toward the past, rather than toward the future. We found three futuristic-looking segments behind mistwalls; but they were either apparently stripped of anything or anyone useful, or else their very futuriness was in doubt. It was two weeks and two days before we found a segment that was undeniably part of a city belonging to a time yet to come—a far future time, we thought at first. Though of course, there was no way we might tell how much time would have been necessary to make changes.

This particular segment was behind the second mistwall we had encountered that day. The first had showed us nothing but unrelieved forest, stretched out over descending hills to a horizon that was lost in haze, but which must have been many miles off. Such a landscape might be part of a future segment, but it was not travelable by our wheeled vehicles and it promised nothing. We pulled back through the mistwall—it was then about two in the morning—paused for an early lunch, and went on.

About 2:30 p.m., we saw a second stationary mistwall and moved up to it. We were traveling along a gravel road at the time through what seemed like an area of small farms. The mistwall sliced across a cornfield and obliterated the corner of what had once been a tall, white, and severely narrow farmhouse—an American Gothic among farmhouses.

We left our motorcade in the road and Bill and I walked up the farm road into the farmyard, carrying most of the instruments. The rest straggled along behind us, but stayed back, as I had repeatedly warned them to, a good twenty yards from where we were working.

I said the rest stayed back—I should have said all the rest but Sunday. After Bill and I had penetrated through the

third wall we encountered together, I had heard something odd behind me and looked to see Sunday coming through the mistwall behind us, tossing his head, his eyes closed, and mewling like a lost kitten. He broke out and came to me—still with his eyes closed, and evidently doeping on nose alone—and it had taken me fifteen minutes to soothe him back to quietness. However, going back through the mistwall later, he had been much less upset; and two days later he was accompanying us with the indifference of a veteran. Of course, as soon as he started coming through the mistwalls after us, the girl did too. But it was possible to order her out; Sunday could not be kept back.

So, in this case, as had become his habit, Sunday followed Bill and me up to the mistwall and waited while we had made our measurements and tests. These showed it to be little different from the many other walls we had tested. But when we finally went through this time, we found a difference.

We came out in a—what? A courtyard, a square, a plaza . . . take your pick. It was an oval of pure white surface and behind, all about it, rose a city of equal whiteness. Not the whiteness of new concrete, but the whiteness of veinless, milk-colored marble. And there was no sound about it. Not even the cries of birds or insects. No sound at all.

" . . . We were the first," wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Rime Of The Ancient Mariner*—

"Who ever burst,
"Into that silent sea . . ."

If you know that bit of poetry, if you love poetry the way I do, you will be able to feel something like the sensations that hit Bill and me when we emerged from the mistwall into that city. Those lines give it to you. It was with us and that city beyond our time, as it had been with that sea and Coleridge's Mariner. It was a city of silence, silence such as neither of us had ever heard; and such as we had never suspected could exist—until that moment. We were trapped by that silence, held by it, suddenly motionless and fixed, for fear of intruding one tiny noise into that vast, encompassing and majestic void of soundlessness, like flower petals suddenly encased in plastic. It held us both, frozen; and the fear of being the first to break it was like a sudden hypnotic clutch on our minds, too great for us to

resist.

We were locked in place; and perhaps we might have stood there until we dropped, if it had been left to our own wills alone to save us.

But we were rescued. Shatteringly and suddenly, echoing and re-echoing off to infinity among the white towers and ways before us, came the loud scrape of claws on a hard surface; and a broad, warm, hard, leopard-head butted me in the ribs, knocking me off my frozen balance to fall with a deafening clatter to the pavement as my gun and my equipment went spilling all around me.

With that, the spell was smashed. It had only been that first, perfect silence that operated so powerfully on our emotions and that, once destroyed, could never be recreated. It was an awesome, echoing place, that city—like some vast, magnificent tomb. But it was just a place, once its first grip on us had been loosed. I picked myself up.

"Let's have a look around," I said to Bill.

He nodded. He was not, as I was, a razor addict; and over the two weeks or more since I had met him, he had been letting his beard go with only occasional scrapings. Now, a faint soft fuzz darkened his lower face. Back beyond the mistwall, with his young features, this had looked more ridiculous than anything else; but here against the pure whiteness all around us and under a cloudless, windless sky, the beard, his outdoor clothing, his rifle and instruments, all combined to give him a savage, intruder's look. And if he looked so, just from being unshaven, I could only guess how I might appear, here in this unnaturally perfect place.

We went forward, across the level floor of the plaza, or whatever, on which we had entered. At its far side were paths leading on into the city; and as we stepped on one, it began to move, carrying us along with it. Sunday went straight up in the air, cat-fashion, the moment he felt it stir under his feet, and hopped back off it. But when he saw it carrying me away from him, he leaped back on and came forward to press hard against me as we rode—it was the way he had pressed against me on the lizards' raft during the storm before he, the girl and I had had to swim for shore.

The walkway carried us in among the buildings and we were completely surrounded by milky whiteness. I had

thought at first that the buildings had no windows; but apparently they had—only of a different sort than anything I had ever imagined. Seeing the windows was apparently all a matter of angle. One moment it seemed I would be looking at a blank wall—the next I would have a glimpse of some shadowed or oddly angled interior. It was exactly the same sort of glimpse as that you get of the mercury line in a fever thermometer, when you rotate the thermometer to just the proper position. But there was no indication of life, anywhere.

Around us, over us, the city was lifeless. This was more than a fact of visual observation. We could feel the lack of anything living in all the structures around us, like an empty ache in the mind. It was not a painful or an ugly feeling, but it was an unpleasant feeling just for the reason that it was not a natural one. That much massive construction, empty, ready and waiting, was an anomaly that ground against the human spirit. The animal spirit as well, for that matter; because Sunday continued to press against me for reassurance as we went. We stepped off the walkway at last—it stopped at once as we did so—and looked around at a solid mass of white walls, all without visible windows or doors.

"Nothing here," said Bill Gault, after a while. "Let's go back now."

"No, wait," I said. "Listen!" For the first time my ears had caught a sound. It was the noise of a faint, dull-toned but regular clanking. The sort of thing you might hear from a large toy tractor, if it had been constructed with its movable parts out of plastic, rather than metal. And this sound growing louder, was coming steadily toward us.

I had the machine pistol up and aimed without thinking, and Bill had his gun also pointed, when the source of the noise came around the corner of the same building where we had blown the opening in the wall. It came toward us, apparently either not understanding, or understanding but ignoring, the menace of our guns. I stared at it, unbelievably, because I had a hard time making up my mind whether it was creature or machine.

By the time I had reluctantly concluded it was a creature, it was less than a dozen feet from us and it stopped. A machine I might have risked pumping a few slugs into. A creature was another matter entirely. Aside from the fact that

killing another living thing has some emotional overtones to it, there were a great many more dangerous possibilities involved for us if it was alive, and our hostile response was not successful. So we simply stood and looked it over, and it looked us over.

It looked—it's hard to say how it looked in that first minute. Something like a Saint Bernard-sized, very short-limbed, very heavy-headed, bulldog shape, with a clump of three tails or tentacles about two feet in length sprouting from each shoulder. The whole body was covered with rectangular bony plates about a couple of inches at their widest, which flexed at their joints with the plates surrounding them, so as to allow the body beneath them to move. Smaller plates even covered most of the massive head. The two eyes were brown and large.

"Don't shoot!" I said to Bill, without taking my eyes off the creature.

I don't know what movement of his, if any, triggered off that reaction to me. At the moment, I only know two things. I had been searching for an x-factor, a Game Warden, a missing piece to the puzzle of the time-storm from the very beginning, and the old reliable search-reflex in the back of my mind was practically shouting at me now that this might be it. And—second, but no less important—the whole improbable being radiated an impression of noeminity. That impressive armor, that ferocious head, somehow added up not so much to something threatening, as to something rather clumsy and comic—even lovable, like the bulldog it faintly resembled.

Still, I would have had trouble convincing Bill of any of that alibi—but luckily, just at that moment I got corroborative testimony from a completely unexpected source, Sunday. Up until now the leopard had not moved; but now, suddenly, he strolled past me, right up the creature, and proceeded to stomp himself in a friendly manner up one side of it and down the other. He then sniffed it over a few times, and gravely returned to me. That did it. Bill lowered his gun.

"Hello," I said to the creature. The word sounded almost ridiculous in the context of our confrontation, here in this silent, strange place. The creature said nothing.

"I'm Marc Despard," I said. "This is Bill Gault."

Still no answer.

"Marc," said Bill, in a strained, thin voice. "Let's start backing up, slowly. If it lets us go, we can back right into the mistwall, and maybe it won't follow us—"

He broke off because some sounds were finally beginning to come from the creature. Sounds that were something like a cross between the internal rumblings of indigestion and the creaking of machinery that had not been used in a long time.

"Due . . ." said the creature, in a deep-tone, grating voice. "Yanglish."

It fell silent. We waited for more sounds, but none came.

"Start backing if you want," I answered Bill, still keeping my gaze, however, on the creature. "I'm going to stay and see if I can't find out something about this."

"I . . ." said the creature, loudly, before Bill could answer me. There was a pause while we waited for more.

"I am . . ." it said, after a second. Another pause. Then it continued, in jerks, almost as if it was holding a conversation with itself except that the pauses between bits of conversation became shorter and shorter until they approached ordinary sentence-length human speech.

"I am . . ." said the creature again.

" . . . Porniarsk."

"Porniarsk, I am . . . an of . . ."

"[I am Porniarsk Prime Three . . . of . . . an . . ."

"[I am Porniarsk Prime Three, an . . . avatar . . . of Porniarsk . . ."

" . . . Expert in Temporals General. I am the . . . third . . . avatar of Porniarsk . . . who is an . . . expert on the Temporal Question."

"It's a robot of some sort," said Bill, staring at Porniarsk's avatar.

"No," it said. "I am Poroiarsk. Avatar, secondarily only. I am living . . . alive. As you are."

"Do we call you Porniarsk?" I asked.

There was a pause, then a new sort of creaking, unused machinery noise; and the heavy head was nodding up and down, so slowly, awkwardly and deliberately that the creature called Porniarsk looked even more comic than before. It broke off its head-movements abruptly at the top of a nod.

"Yes," it said. "Porniarsk Prime Three is . . . a full name. Call me Poroiarsk. Also, *he*. I am . . . male."

"We'll do that," I said. "Porniarsk,

I'm sorry about damaging your city here. We didn't think there was anyone still around."

"It is not . . . it isn't my city," said Porniarsk. "I mean, it's neither mine as avatar, nor is it something that belongs to me as Porniarsk. I come from . . ."

He had been going great guns, but all at once he was blocked again. We waited, while he struggled with his verbal problem.

"I come from many . . . stellar distances away," he said, finally. "Also from a large temporal . . . time . . . distance. But I should say also that, in another measure, I am . . . from close to here."

"Close to this world?" Bill asked.

"Not . . ." Porniarsk broke off in order to work at the process of shaking his head, this time, "to this world, generally. Just to . . . here, this place, and a few other places on your Earth."

"Is this place—this city or whatever it is . . ." asked Bill, "from the same time as the time you come from?"

"No," said Porniarsk. "No two times can be alike—no more than two grains of sand be identical."

"We aren't stupid, you know," said Bill. For the first time I'd known him, there was an edge in his voice. "If you can tell us that much, you can do a better job of explaining things than you're doing."

"Not stupid . . . ignorant," said Porniarsk, improving his speech as he went. "Later, perhaps? I am from far off, spatially; from far off, temporally; but from close, distance-wise. When you broke the wall here, this city signalled. I had been for a long period of my own time on the watch for some such happening at any one of the many spots I could monitor, and when the city signalled, I came."

"Why is the city so important?" I asked.

"It isn't," said Porniarsk, swinging his heavy head to look at me. "You are important—I believe. I'll go with you now unless you reject me; and at last perhaps we can be of use to ourselves and to the universe."

I looked at Bill. Bill looked at me.

"Just a minute," I said. "I want to look this place over. It's from out of our future, if my guess is right. There may be a lot of things here we can use."

"Nothing," said Porniarsk. "It is only a museum—with all its exhibits taken away long since."

He made no visible move that my eyes could catch but, suddenly, all the walls about us seemed to suck themselves in and produce circular doorways.

"If you would like to look, do so," Porniarsk said. He folded his short legs inward under him and went down like a large coffee table with its four supports chopped away by four axmen at once. "I will wait. Use-time is subjective."

So, accompanied by Sunday, we searched through a couple of the now-open buildings. But it was as I had half-suspected. Porniarsk had not been lying. The buildings were nothing but a lot of empty rooms—in immaculate condition, without a trace of dust or damage—but empty. Echo-empty.

In the end we went back and collected Porniarsk. He clattered to his feet as we came up and fell in step with us when I told him we were headed back through the mistwall to the rest of our people. However, I stopped when we came to the nearer edge of the wall.

"I'd like you to wait here, Porniarsk," I told him, "while Bill and I go through first. Give us a chance to tell the rest of our people about you and tone down the surprise when you show up. Is that all right with you?"

"All right," said Porniarsk, chunking down into lying position again. "Call when you want me to come after you."

"We will," I said.

I led Bill and Sunday back through the mist. When we opened our eyes on the other side, it was to find a deserted, if cozy-looking, farmyard. The cooktent had been set up in the yard and Marie had both charcoal grills going. They all looked up at the sight of Bill and me, with Sunday, emerging from the mistwall.

"Gather around," I said. "We've brought back someone for you all to meet. Brace yourselves—he's not human. Bill, do you want to call him?"

"Porniarsk!" shouted Bill, turning to the mistwall.

Marie and the rest also turned toward the mistwall, with a swiftness that cheered me up, somewhat. I had meant what I had said to Porniarsk about preparing them for the shock of meeting him. Now the thought in my mind was that a little shock might have a salutary effect on them. We were not an army of world-conquerors, after all. Half a dozen determined adults with decent rifles could wipe us out or make slaves of us at a moment's notice, if we took

Vincent DiFuria





no precautions.

Porniarsk came clanking through the mistwall into view and stopped before us.

"I am Porniarsk Prime Three," he announced, in exactly the same tones in which he had introduced himself to Bill and me. "The third avatar of Porniarsk, an expert in Temporal science. I hope to work together with you so that we all may benefit the universe."

"Yes," said Bill, dryly. "Only, of course we've a little more interest in helping ourselves first."

Porniarsk swiveled his heavy head to look at Bill.

"It is the same thing," Porniarsk said.

"Is it?" said Bill.

Porniarsk creaked off a nod.

"What you've observed as a local phenomena," he said, "are essentially microechos of the larger disturbance, which began roughly half a billion years ago, according to your original time pattern."

"Oh?" said Bill. He was trying to be indifferent, but I could catch the ring of interest in his voice that he was trying to hide. "Well, just as long as it can be fixed."

"It cannot be fixed," said Porniarsk. "The knowledge is not available to fix it."

"It isn't?" I said. "Then what's all this about helping the universe?"

"The whole problem is beyond my time pattern and any other time pattern I know," said Porniarsk. "Yet, our responsibility remains. Though we cannot solve, we can attack the problem, each of us like the ants of which you know, trying to level a mountain such as you are familiar with. With each microecho, each infinitesimal node attacked, we approach a solution, even if it is not for us to reach it."

"Wait a minute—" began Tek.

"Hold it!" I said, hastily. "Let me get to the bottom of this, first. Porniarsk, just how far does the whole problem extend—this problem of which our troubles here are a microecho?"

"I thought," said Porniarsk, "I had made clear the answer to that question. The temporal maladjustments are symptoms of the destruction of an entropic balance which has become omnipresent. The chaos in temporal patterns is universal."

None of us said anything. Porniarsk stood waiting for a moment and then

realized he had not yet reached our basic levels of understanding.

"More simply put," he said, "all time and space are affected. The universe has been fragmented from one order into a wild pattern of smaller orders, each with its own direction and rate of creation or decay. We can't cure that situation, but we can work against it. We *must* work against it, otherwise the process will continue and the fragmentation will increase, tending toward smaller and smaller orders until each individual particle becomes a universe to itself."

"How can we work against it?" I asked.

"I can show you a place where work can be done," he said.

It was, somehow, the answer I had been expecting all along. And that is the last thing I remember hearing him saying then, because at that point my mind seemed to explode with what it had just discovered—go into overdrive with the possibilities developing from that—on a scale that made any past mental work I had ever done seem like kindergarten-level playtime, by comparison. At last, my hungry rat's teeth had found something they could tear into.

Bill told me later that after a while I came to and gave everybody, including Porniarsk, orders to pack up and move on; and I kept the avatar and all of us moving steadily for the better part of the next three weeks. Just moving, not stopping to investigate what was beyond the mistwall, or in any of the buildings or communities we passed. Pushing forward as if I were on a trek to some far distant land of great promise.

Moments of that trek, I dimly remember. But only moments. I was too full of the end result of all the speculations I had been making about the time-storm—now paying off all at once. I did have flashes of awareness of what I was doing, and of what was going on around me. But it was all background, unimportant scenery for the real place I was in and the real thing I was doing, which was *The Dream*.

In *The Dream* I was the equivalent of a spider. I say "the equivalent of," because I was still myself; I was just operating like a spider. If that doesn't make sense, I'm sorry, but it's the best I can do by way of explanation. As description, it hardly makes sense to me either; but I've never found another way to describe what that particular brain-hurri-

cane was like.

In *The Dream*, then, I was spiderlike; and I was clambering furiously and endlessly about a confusion of strands that stretched from one end of infinity to the other. The strands had a pattern, though it would have taken someone infinite in size to stand back enough to perceive it as a whole. Still, in a way I can't describe, I was aware of that pattern. My work was with it; and that work filled me with such a wild, terrible and singing joy that it was only a hairline away from being an agony. The joy of working with the pattern, of handling it, sent me scrambling inconceivable distances at unimaginable speeds across the strands that filled the universe, with every ounce of strength, every braincell, engaged in what I was doing, every nerve stretched to the breaking-point. It was a berserk explosion of energy that did not care if it destroyed its source that was myself, as long as things were done to the pattern that needed doing; and somehow this was all associated with my memories of my first determination to put my brand on the world about me; so the energy sprang from deep sources within me.

Actually, what I was experiencing was beyond ordinary description. The pattern was nameless. My work with it was outside definition. But at the same time, I knew inside me that it was the most important work that ever had been and ever would be. It carried an adrenalinlike drunkenness that was far beyond any familiar self-intoxication. People talk, or use to talk, about drug highs. This high was not a matter of chemistry, but of physics. Every molecule of my body was charged and set vibrating in resonance with the pattern and the work I was doing upon it.

Meanwhile, I continued with some detached part of my consciousness to lead and direct my small band of pilgrims; effectively enough, at least, so that they did not depose me as a mad-mao and set up some new leader in my place. Not but what—as I found out later—they did not all notice a difference in me, and individually react to or use that difference to their own purposes. When I returned wholly to myself, we had halted, facing a stationary mistwall dead ahead; and two hours later we set up evening camp a couple of hundred yards from it.

The countryside here was open pastureland, rolling hills with only an oc-

casional tree, but small stands of brush and marshy ponds. Here and there a farmer's fence straggled across the landscape and the two-lane blacktop road we had been following, since its sudden appearance out of nowhere ten miles before, ran at an angle into the mistwall and disappeared. The day had been cool. Our campfires felt good. Autumn would be along before long, I thought, and with that began to turn over ideas for the winter; whether to find secure shelter in this climate or head south.

I made an attempt to get Porniarsk to tell me what lay on the other side of the mistwall; but he was not helpful.

"But that's it?" I said. "The place you talked about?"

"Yes," he answered.

"You could at least tell us if we're liable to fall off a cliff before we come out of the wall, or step into a few hundred feet of deep water," I growled at him.

"You won't encounter any cliffs, lakes, or rivers before you have a chance to see them," Porniarsk said. "As far as the terrain goes, it's not that dissimilar from the land around us here."

"Then why not tell us about it?"

"The gestalt impression will be of importance to you later."

That was all I could get out of him. After dinner, I called a meeting. Porniarsk attended. I told the others that Porniarsk believed that beyond this particular mistwall there was an area different from any we'd run into so far. We might find equipment there that would let us do something about the time-storm and the moving mistwalls. Bill and I in particular were interested in the chance of doing so, as they all knew. For one thing, if we could somehow stop the mistwalls from moving, we could see safe setting down someplace permanently. Perhaps we could start rebuilding a civilization.

It was quite a little speech. When I was done, they all looked at me, looked at Porniarsk who had neither moved nor spoken, and then looked back at me again. None of them said anything. But looking back at them, I got the clear impression that there were as many different reactions to what I had just said as there were beads there to contain the reactions.

"All right, then," I said, after a reasonable wait to give anyone else a chance to speak. "We'll be going in, in

the morning. The ones going will be Bill, me, and three others, all with rifles and shotguns both, in one of the jeeps. Anybody particularly want to be in on the expedition, or shall I pick out the ones to go?"

"I'll go," said Tek.

"No," I said. "I want you to stay here."

I looked around the firelit circle of faces, but there were no other volunteers.

"All right, then," I said. "It'll be Richie, Alao, and Waite. Starting with the best shot and working down the list."

An ideal expeditionary group would have been myself, Tek, and a couple of the men, none of whom meant a great deal to me—except myself, and I was too much of an egotist to think that I couldn't survive whatever mystery lay in front of me. Sunday, the girl, Bill, even to a certain extent Marie and little Woody, were people I cared about to one degree or another and would just as soon have kept safely in the rear area.

But Bill could not be left behind, in justice. The quest to understand the time-storm was as much his as mine. Sunday could not be kept out, in practice. Meanwhile Tek, who outside of myself was the one person fit to take charge of those left behind if enemies of some kind suddenly appeared over the horizon behind us, could by no stretch of common sense be taken. Ever since Marie, Wendy, and I had run into him and his group, I had been half-expecting that any day, we might bump into another such armed and predatory gang.

"All right!" I said. "If everybody's going to go, we'll have to use the pickup. Let's get it cleared out!"

The pickup was our main transport. In the back, it had all our camping equipment, food, fuel, and other supplies. We had unloaded part of what it contained to set up camp the night before; but if it was to be used as a battle wagon, the rest of the box had to be cleared. We moved back and went to work.

Twenty minutes later, we once more approached the mistwall; this time in the pickup, in low gear. The girl, who had insisted on joining us, Bill and I were in the front seat with the windows rolled up, and me as driver. In the open box behind were Alan and Waite and Richie, holding a disgruntled Sunday on a leash. I'd shut the leopard out of the

cab by main force and snapped his leash around his ock when he tried to join the three of us in the cab. As I pushed the nose of the pickup slowly into the first dust of the mistwall, there was a heavy thud on the roof of the cab. I stopped, rolled down the window and stuck my head out to glimpse Sunday now lying on the cab top. I rolled the window back up and went on.

The mist surrounded us. The dust hissed on the metal of the pickup's body, as the motor of the truck grumbled in low gear. We were surrounded by an undeviating whiteness in which it was impossible to tell if we were moving. Then the whiteness lightened, thinned, and suddenly we rolled out into sunlight again. I stopped the truck.

We were in a rocky, hilly section of country. The thin, clear air that made everything stand out with sudden sharpness signaled that we were at a higher altitude, and the sparseness of vegetation—oo trees and only an occasional green, spiny bush—suggested a high, desert country, like the *altiplano* of inland Mexico. The landscape was mainly rock, from hard dirt and gravel to boulders of all sizes. Rough, but not too rough for the jeeps to get through and, if a clear route could be found between the boulders, probably even the pickup could be nursed along.

The ground before us was fairly clear and level, but boulder strewn slopes rose sharply to right and left of us. Directly ahead, the level space dipped down into a cup-shaped depression holding what appeared to be a small village. The buildings in the village were odd; dome-shaped, with floorless, front-porch extensions, consisting simply of projecting roofs upheld at each end by supporting poles. Under those roofs, out in the open, there seemed to be a few machines or equipment—mechanical constructs of some kind. No human beings were visible. Beyond the village the ground rose sharply into a small mountain—it was too steep to be called a hill—wearing a belt of trees halfway up its several hundred feet of height. On one side of the mountain the bare peak sloped at an angle the jeeps could possibly manage. But the other slopes were all boulder-strewn and climbable only by someone on foot.

On top, crowing the peak, was a large, solid, circular building, looking as if it had been poured out of fresh white concrete ten seconds before we ap-

peared on the scene. That was as much as I had a chance to notice, because then everything started to happen.

A number of objects hit loudly on the body and cab of the truck, one shattering the window next to Bill. At the same time, there was a yowl of rage from Sunday and I caught sight fleetingly of the leopard leaping off the roof of the cab to the right, with his leash trailing in the air behind him. Suddenly the rocks around us were speckled by the visages of dark-furred, apelike creatures.

The guns of the men in the box were firing. The girl, who had been seated between Bill and myself, scrambled over Bill crying out Sunday's name, opened the door of the pickup on that side, and disappeared. Bill exited after her, and I heard the machete pistol yammering. I jerked open the door on my side, rolled out on to the hard-pebbled earth, and began firing from a prone position at any furry head I could see.

There was a timeless moment of noise and confusion—and then without warning it was over. There were no longer any creatures visible to shoot at, except for perhaps four or five who lay still, or barely stirring, on the ground. I fired a few more rounds out of reflex, and then quit. The other guns fell silent.

I got to my feet. Sunday stalked back into my line of vision, his tail high in self-congratulation. He beaded for one of the two furry figures that still moved. I opened my mouth to call him back; but before he could have reached the creature, a rifle in the box behind me began to sound again and both the moving bodies went motionless.

"Quit that!" I shouted, spinning around. "I want one alive!"

I broke off, suddenly realizing I was talking to a man who wasn't listening. Richie, his round face contorted, was kneeling behind the metal side of the pickup box, firing steadily at the dark-furred shapes; and he kept at it until his rifle was empty.

I climbed into the box and took the gun away from him as he tried to reload it.

"Simmer down!" I said.

He looked at me glassy-eyed, but sat without moving. There wasn't a mark on him.

But the other two were hit. Alao had one side of his face streaming blood from what seemed to be a scalp wound. He was holding up Waite, who was breathing in an ugly, rattling way with

his face as white as the building on the peak. His right hand was trapped behind Alan; but he kept trying to bring his left hand up to his chest and Alan kept holding it away.

My head cleared. I remembered now that the barrage that had come at us had contained not only thrown rocks but a few leaf-shaped, hilless knives. One of the knives was now sticking in Waite's chest low on the left side. It was in perhaps a third the length of its blade; and evidently it had slid in horizontally between two ribs.

Waite coughed and little pink froth came out the corners of his mouth.

"He wants to get the knife out," said Alan pleadingly to me. "Should we just pull it out, do you think?"

I looked down at Waite. It did not matter, clearly, whether we took the knife out or not. The blade had gone into his lungs and now they were filling up with blood. Waite looked back up at me with panic in his eyes. He was the quiet one of Tek's four men, and possibly the youngest. I had never been sure if he was really like the others, or whether he had simply gotten swept up and tried to be like them.

There was nothing I or anyone else in our group could do for him. I stood looking down at him, feeling my helplessness, like something in my own chest being raggedly cut. This was one of the people I had been thinking meant little or nothing to me and would be easily expendable. I had not stopped to realize how close a group like ours could come to be, living together like a family, moving together, facing a possibly dangerous world together. Maybe he would die more quickly without the knife blade in him, and removing it would be the kindest thing we could do for him.

"If he wants it out, he might as well have it out," I said.

Alan let go of Waite's arm. The arm came up and its hand grasped the handle of the knife, but could not pull it out. Alan half-reached for the knife himself, hesitated, tried again, hesitated, and looked appealingly at me.

I reached down and took hold of the handle. The blade stuck at first, then slid out easily. Waite yelled—or rather, he tried to yell, but it was a sound that ended in a sort of gargle. He pulled away a little from Alan, and leaned over forward, face tilted down intently toward the bed of the box, as if he was going to be sick. But he was not. He

merely hung there sagging against the grip of Alan's arms, his gaze calm and intent on the metal flooring; and then, as we watched, he began to die.

It was like watching him dwindle away from us. His face relaxed and relaxed and the focus in his eyes became more and more general, until all at once there was no focus at all and he was dead. Alan let him down quickly but softly on the bed of the box.

I turned and climbed out of the box back onto the ground. I saw Bill standing on this side of the truck now, and Sunday nosing curiously at one of the bodies. Suddenly, it struck me.

"Girl!" I shouted at Bill. "The girl! Where is she?"

"I don't know," said Bill.

I ran around the front of the truck and the bouldered slope on the side I'd seen her disappear.

"Girl!" I kept shouting. "Girl!"

I couldn't find her. I found one of the dead ape-creatures, but I couldn't find her. I started threading back and forth among the rocks as I worked up the slope; and then, suddenly, I almost fell over her. She was in a little open space, half-sitting up with her back against a boulder and a torn-off strip of her shirt tied around one leg above the knee.

For a moment I thought she was already dead, like Waite—and I couldn't take it. It was like being cut in half. Then she turned her head to look at me and I saw she was alive.

"Oh, my God!" I said.

I knelt down beside her and wrapped her up in my arms, telling myself I would never let go of her again. Never. But she was as stiff and unresponsive in my grasp as a wild animal caught in a trap. She did not move; but she did not relax either; and finally this brought me more or less back to my senses. I didn't want to let her go, but I stopped holding her quite so tightly.

"Are you all right?" I said. "Why didn't you answer me?"

"My name's Ellen," she said.

"Is that all?" I hugged her again.

"All right? You'll be Ellen from now on. I won't ever call you anything else!"

"It doesn't matter what you call me," she said. "I'm not going to be here, anyway."

She was still stiff and cold. I let go of her and sat back on my knees so that I could see her face; and it was as unyielding as the rest of her.

"What do you mean, you aren't go-

ing to be here?" She was talking nonsense. She had evidently been hurt or wounded in the leg, but that could hardly be serious.

"Tek and I are going away by ourselves. It's already decided," she said. "We were just waiting to make sure you got through this last mistwall, all right. You can keep Sunday. He only gets in the way all the time, anyway."

She turned, grabbed hold of the boulder against which she had been leaning, and pulled herself up on one leg.

"Help me back to the pickup," she said.

My head was whirling with that crazy announcement of hers. I stared down at her bandaged leg.

"What happened to you?" I said, automatically.

"I got hit by a rock, that's all. It scraped the skin off and bled a little, so I wrapped it up; but it's only a bruise."

"Try putting your weight on it." Something automatic in me was doing the talking. "Maybe it's broken."

"It's not broken. I already tried." She took hold of my arm with both her hands. "It just hurts to walk on it. Help me."

I put an arm around her and she hopped back down the slope on one leg by my side until we reached the cab of the pickup, and I helped her up onto the seat. I was operating on reflex. I could not believe what she had said; particularly just now when I had just realized how important she was to me. It was the way I had found myself feeling about Waite, multiplied something like a million times. But there were things demanding decisions from me.

Richie and Alan were still in the back of the truck with the body of Waite. I looked at them. Somebody had to take the pickup back through the mistwall with the girl and Waite. Richie was the unhurt one, but his eyes still did not look right.

"How badly are you hurt?" I asked Alan.

"Hurt?" he said. "It didn't get hurt."

"You could fool me," I said dryly. He didn't seem to get it. "Your head! How bad's the damage to your head?"

"My head?"

He put up a hand and brought it down covered with blood. His face whitened.

"What is it?" he said. "How bad . . ." His bloody hand was fluttering

up toward the head wound, wanting to touch it, but afraid of what it might feel.

"That's what I want to know," I said.

I climbed into the cab and bent over him, gingerly parting the hair over the bloody scalp. It was such a mess I couldn't see anything.

"Feel anything?" I asked, probing with my fingertips.

"No . . . no . . . yes!" he yelped.

I pulled my hands away.

"How bad did that feel?" I asked him. He looked embarrassed.

"Not too bad—I guess," he said.

"But I felt it, where you touched it."

"All right," I told him. "Hang on, because I'm going to have to touch it some more."

I probed around with my fingers, wishing I'd had the sense to bring bandages and water with us. He said nothing to indicate that I was giving him any important amount of pain; and all my fingers could find was a swelling and a relatively small cut.

"It's really not bad at all," he said, sheepishly when I'd finished. "I think I just got bit by a rock, come to think of it."

"All right," I said. My own hands were a mess now. I wiped them as best I could on the levis I was wearing. "Looks like a bump and a scratch, only. It just put out a lot of blood. If you're up to it, I want you to stay."

"I can stay," he said.

"All right, then. Richie!"

Richie looked at me slowly as if I was someone calling him from a distance.

"Richie! I want you to drive the pickup back through the mistwall. You're to take the girl and Waite back, then pick up some bandages, some antibiotics and a jerry can of drinking water, and bring it back to us. Understand me?"

"Yeah . . ." said Richie, thickly.

"Come on, then," I said.

I climbed out of the box of the pickup and he came after me. I saw him into the cab and behind the wheel.

"He'll take you back to the camp," I told the girl, and closed the door on the driver's side before she could answer—assuming, that is, that she had intended to answer. The pickup's motor, which had been idling all this time, growled into gear. Richie swung it about and drove out of sight into the mistwall, headed back.

I looked around. Bill was standing

about twenty yards ahead of me. Beside him was Porniarsk, who must have followed us through the mistwall at some time when I wasn't looking. They seemed to be talking together, looking down into the village, the machine pistol hanging by its strap carelessly from Bill's right arm. It was incautious of him to be so relaxed, I thought. We had driven off one attack, but there was no way of knowing we might not have another at any minute.

I went toward them. As I did, I had to detour around the body of one of the attackers, who had apparently been trying to rush the pickup. It lay face-down, the apelike features hidden and it reminded me of Waite, somehow. For a moment I wondered if there were others among its fellows that were feeling the impact of this one's death, as I had felt that of Waite. My mind—it was not quite under control right then—my mind skittered out to think of the girl again. Of Ellen—I must remember to think of her as Ellen from now on.

It was so strange. She was small and skinny and cantankerous. How could I love her like this? Where did it come from, what I was feeling? Somehow, when I wasn't paying any attention, she had grown inside me and now she took up all the available space there. Another thought came by, blown on the wandering breeze of my not-quite-in-control mind. What about Marie? I couldn't just kick her out. But maybe there was no need for worry. All Marie had ever seemed to want was the protection inherent in our partnership. It might be she would be completely satisfied with the name of consort alone. After all, there were no laws now, no reason that I couldn't apparently have two wives instead of one. No one but us three need know Marie was a wife in name only . . . of course, the girl would have to agree . . .

I stopped thinking, having reached Bill and Porniarsk. They were still looking down at the village. I looked down, too; and to my surprise saw it populated and busy. Black, furry, apelike figures were visible all through its streets and moving in and out of the dome-shaped houses. Most, in fact, seemed to be busy with whatever objects they had under the porchlike roofs before the entrances of their buildings. But a fair number were visible simply sitting in the dust, singly or in pairs, doing nothing; and a small group were in transit from one

spot to another.

They were within easy rifle shot of where we stood, and the three of us have been plainly visible to them, but they paid us no attention whatsoever.

"What the hell?" I said. "Is that the same tribe that hit us just now?"

"Yes," said Bill.

I looked at him and waited for him to go on, but he nodded at Porniarsk instead.

"Ask him," he said.

Porniarsk creaked his head around to look sideways and up at me.

"They're experimental animals,"

Porniarsk said, "from a time less than a hundred years ahead of that you were in originally, when the time-storm reached you."

"You knew about them?" The thought of Waite made my throat tight. "You knew about them waiting to kill us and you didn't warn us?"

"I knew only they were experimental animals," said Porniarsk. "Apparently part of their conditioning is to attack. But if the attack fails, they go back to other activities."

"It could be . . ." said Bill slowly and thoughtfully, "it could be their attack reflex was established to be used against animals, instead of the people of the time that set them up here; and they just didn't recognize us as belonging to the people level, as they'd been trained to recognize it."

"It's possible," said Porniarsk, "and then, if they attacked and failed, they might be conditioned to stop attacking, as a fail-safe reflex."

"That's damned cool of the both of you," I said, my throat free again.

"Waite's dead and you're holding a parlor discussion on the reasons."

Bill looked at me, concerned.

"All right, all right," I said. "Forget I said that. I'm still a little shook up from all this. So, they're experimental animals down there, are they?"

"Yes," said Porniarsk, "experimental animals, created by genetic engineering to test certain patterns of behavior. Up there on the height behind their community is the laboratory building from which they were observed and studied. The equipment in that structure that was designed for working with this problem is equipment that, with some changes and improvements, may be able to aid in controlling the effects of the time storm, locally."

Bill was staring straight at me. His

face was calm, but I could hear the excitement under the level note he tried to speak in.

"Let's take a look, Marc."

"All right," I said. "As soon as the pickup comes back, we'll go get a jeep and try that long slope on the right of the peak."

The only vehicle-possible route to the peak led down through the main street of the village. When Alan got back with a jeep, we left him there, and Porniarsk, Bill and I drove down the slope and in between the buildings. We had perhaps twenty feet to spare on either side of us as we went through the village for the central street—if you could call it that—was twice the width of the other lanes between buildings. The furry faces we passed did not bother to look at us, with a single exception. A slightly grizzled, large, and obviously male individual—none of them wore anything but a sort of Sam Browne belt, to which were clipped the sheaths that held their knives and some things which looked like small hand-tools—sat in front of one building and stared from under thick tufts of hair where his brows should be, his long fingers playing with the knife he held on his knees. But he made no threatening moves, with the knife or anything else.

"Look at that old man," said Bill, pointing with the muzzle of his machine pistol at the watcher.

"I see him," I said. "What do you want me to do about him?"

"Nothing, I'd suggest," said Porniarsk. My question had not really called for an answer, but perhaps he had not understood that. "That one's the Alpha Prime of the male community. The name 'Old Man' fits him very well. As Alpha Prime, his reflexes or conditioning dictates a somewhat different pattern of action for him alone. But I don't think he or the others will act inimically again, unless you deliberately trigger some antagonistic reaction."

"What are they all doing?" Bill asked.

I looked in the direction he was staring. There were a number of porches along the left side of the street, each with one or two of the experimentals under them. I picked out one who was operating what was clearly a spinning wheel. Another was cutting up a large sheet of the leathery material their harnesses were made out of, plainly engaged in constructing Sam Browne belts. But the rest were working with

machines I did not recognize and either getting no visible results, or results that made no sense to me. One in particular was typing away energetically at a sort of double keyboard, with no noticeable effect, except for a small red tab that the machine spat out at odd intervals into a wire basket. The worker paid no attention to the tabs he was accumulating, seeming to be completely wound up in the typing process itself.

"They're self-supporting, after a fashion," said Porniarsk. "Some of what they do provides them with what they need to live. Other specific activities are merely for study purposes—for the studies of the people who put them here."

"Where are those people?" I asked. "Can we get in touch with them?"

"No," Porniarsk swiveled his neck to look at me from the seat beside me, once more. "They are not here."

"Where did they go?"

"They no longer exist," said Porniarsk. "No more than all the people you knew before your first experience with the time-storm. You and Bill and the rest of you here, including these experimental creatures, are the ones who have gone places."

I took my attention off the street for a second to look at him.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you and those with you are people the time-storm has moved, rather than eliminated," Porniarsk answered. "I'm sorry, that can't be explained properly to you yet by someone like me, not until you understand more fully what has been involved and is involved in the temporal displacements. Remember, I told you that this disturbance began roughly half a billion years in your past?"

I remembered. But it had only been a figure to me at the time. Who can imagine a time-span of a half a billion years?

"Yes," I said.

"It also began several million years in your future," said Porniarsk. "Perhaps it might help you to think, provisionally, of the time-storm as a wavefront intersecting the linear time you know—the time you imagine stretching from past to future—at an angle, so that your past, present and future are all affected at once by the same action."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" demanded Bill.

"Unfortunately, the image I just gave you isn't really a true one," said Por-

niarsk. "You forget the matter of scale. If the time-storm is like a wave front on a beach, we and our worlds are less than individual atoms in the grain of sand that make up that beach. What we experience as local effects appear as phenomena having very little resemblance to the true picture of the wave front as a whole. I only mention this because it's now become important for Marc to be able to imagine something of the forces at work, here."

The front wheels of the jeep jolted and shuddered over some small rocks. We were moving beyond the end of the village street and up over open ground again. I gave my attention back to my driving.

The drive up even the easy side of the peak was rough enough, but the jeep was equal to it. With enough foresight, it was possible to pick a route among the really heavy boulders that would otherwise have barred our way. A little more than halfway up, we hit a relatively level area of hard earth surrounding the basin of a natural spring coming out of the cliff, and we stopped to rest and taste the water, which was cold enough to set our teeth on edge. I had not been conscious of being thirsty, except for a fleeting moment when I told Richie to bring back a Jerry can of water with the other things. He had, and I had forgotten to get a drink then. Now I felt a thirst like that of someone lost in the desert for two days. I drank key water until my jaws ached; paused, drank, paused, and drank again.

After a bit we went the rest of the way up to the top of the peak, where the building was. Seen up close, it turned out to be a structure maybe sixty feet in diameter, with only one entrance and no windows. Like a blockhouse at a firing range, only larger.

The entrance had a door, which slid aside as we came within a stride of it. We had a glimpse of darkness beyond, then lighting awoke within and we stepped into a brightly illuminated, circular interior, with a raised platform in the center and open cubicles all around the exterior wall, each cubicle with a padded chair, its back toward the center of the room and its cushions facing a sort of console fixed to the wall.

"What is it?" asked Bill almost in a whisper. He was standing with Porniarsk and me on the raised platform but, unlike us, turning continually on his heel as if he wanted to get a view of all

hundred and eighty degrees of the room at once.

"It is," said Porniarsk, "something you might think of as a computer, in your terms. It's a multiple facility for the use of observers who'd wish to draw conclusions from their observations of the inhabitants in the village."

"Computer?" Bill's voice was louder and sharper. "That's all?"

"Its working principle isn't that of the computers you're familiar with," said Porniarsk. "This uses the same principle that's found in constructs from the further future, those I've referred to as devices-of-assistance. You'll have to trust me to put this construct in to that future mode so it'll be useful in the way we need."

"How'll we use it?" Bill asked.

"You won't use it," said Porniarsk.

"Marc will use it."

They both turned their heads toward me.

"And you'll teach me how?" I said to Porniarsk.

"No. You'll have to teach yourself," Porniarsk answered. "If you can't, then there's nothing anyone can do."

"If he can't, I'll try," said Bill tightly.

"I don't think the device will work for you if it fails for Marc," said Porniarsk to him. "Tell me, do you feel anything at this moment? Anything unusual at all?"

"Feel?" Bill stared at him.

"You don't feel anything, then," said Porniarsk. "I was right. Marc should be much more attuned. Marc, what do you feel?"

"Feel? Me?" I said, echoing Bill. But I already knew what he was talking about.

I had thought at first I must be feeling a hangover from the fight with the inhabitants of the village. Then I'd thought the feeling was my curiosity about what was inside this building, until I saw what was there. Now, standing on the platform in the center of the structure, I knew it was something else—something like a massive excitement from everywhere, that was surrounding me, pressing in on me.

"I feel geared-up," I said.

"More than just geared-up, I think," Porniarsk said. "It was a guess I made only on the basis of Marc's heading for this area; but I was right. Porniarsk hoped only that a small oasis of stability might be established on the surface of

this world, in this immediate locality. With anyone else, such as you, Bill, that'd be all we could do. But with Marc maybe we can try something more. There's a chance he has an aptitude for using a device-of-assistance."

"Can't you come up with a better name for it than that?" said Bill. His voice was tight—tight enough to shake just a little.

"What would you suggest?" asked Porniarsk.

I turned and walked away from them, out of the building through the door that opened before me and shut after me. I walked into the solitude of the thin, clear air and the high sunlight. There was something working in me; and for the moment it had driven everything else, even Ellen, out of my mind. It was like a burning, but beneficent, fever, like a great hunger about to be satisfied, like the feeling of standing on the threshold of a cavern filled with treasure beyond counting.

It was all this, and still it was indescribable. I did not yet have it, but I could almost touch it and taste it; and I knew that it was only a matter of time now until my grasp closed on it. Knowing that, was everything. I could wait, now, I could work. I could do anything—for the keys of my kingdom were at hand.

Then began a hittersweet time for me, the several weeks that Porniarsk worked on the equipment in what we were now calling the "roundhouse." It was sweet because day by day I felt the device-of-assistance coming to life under the touch of those three tentacle-fingers Porniarsk had growing out of his shoulders. The avatar had been right about me. The original Porniarsk had not suspected there would be anyone on our Earth who could use the device without being physically connected to it. But evidently I was a freak, I had already had some kind of mental connection with this place, if only subconsciously, during the days of The Dream in which I had pushed us all in this direction, and to this location. I said as much to Porniarsk, one day.

"No," he shook his head. "Before that, I'd think. You must have felt its existence, here, and hence searching for it from the time you woke to find your world changed."

"I was looking," I said. "But I didn't have any idea what for."

"Perhaps," said Porniarsk. "But

you might find, after the device is ready and you can look back over all you've done, that you unconsciously directed each step along the way, toward this place and this moment, from the beginning."

I shook my head. There was no use trying to explain to him, I thought, how I had never been able to let a problem alone. But I did not argue the point any further.

I was too intensely wrapped up in what I could feel growing about me—the assistance of the device. It was only partly mechanical. Porniarsk would not or could not explain its workings to me, although I could watch him as he worked with the small colored cubes that made up the inner parts of seven of the consoles. The cubes were about a quarter the size of children's blocks and seemed to be made of some hard, translucent material. They clung together naturally in the arrangement in which they occurred behind the face of the console; and Porniarsk's work, apparently, was to rearrange their order and get them to cling together again. Apparently, the rearrangement was different with each console, and Porniarsk had to try any number of combinations before he found it. It looked like a random procedure, but evidently was not; and when I asked about that, Porniarsk relaxed his no-information rule enough to tell me that what he was doing was checking arrangements of the cubes in accordance with "sets" he already carried in his memory center, to find patterns that would resonate with the monad that was me. It was not the cubes that were the working parts, evidently, but the patterns.

Whatever he was doing, and however it was effective, when he got a collection of cubes to hang together in a different order, I felt the effect immediately. It was as if another psychic generator had come on-line in my mind. With each addition of power, or strength, or whatever you want to call it, I saw more clearly and more deeply into all things around me.

Including the people. And from this came the hither to join with the sweet of my life. For, as step by step my perceptions increased, I came to perceive that Ellen was indeed intending to leave with Tek, as soon as my work with the device had been achieved. She was staying for the moment and had talked Tek into

staying, only so that he and she could hold down two of the consoles, as Porniarsk had said all of the adults in our party would need to do, when I made my effort to do something about the time-storm. After that, they would go; and nothing I could say would stop her.

The reasons why she had turned to Tek as she had, I could not read in her. Her personal feelings were beyond the reach of my perception. Something shut me out. Porniarsk told me, when I finally asked him, that the reason I could not know how she felt was because my own emotions were involved with her. Had I been able to force myself to see, I would have seen not what was, but what I wanted to see. I would have perceived falsely; and since the perception and understanding I was gaining with the help of the device were part of a true reflection of the universe, the device could give only accurate information, consequently, it gave nothing where only inaccuracy was possible.

So, I was split down the middle; and the division between the triumph and the despair in me grew sharper with the activation of each new console. After the fourth one, the avatar warned me that there was a limit to the step-up I could endure from the device.

"If you feel you're being pushed too hard," he said, "tell me quickly. Too much stimulus and you could destroy yourself before you've had a chance to use the device properly."

"It's all right," I said. "I know what you're talking about." And I did. I could feel myself being stretched daily, closer and closer toward a snapping point. But that point was still not reached; and I wanted to go to the limit, no matter what would happen afterwards.

It was the pain of Ellen's imminent leaving that drove me more than anything else. With the device beginning to work, I was partly out of the ordinary world already. I did not have to test myself by sticking burning splinters in my flesh to know that the physical side of me was much dwindled in importance, lately. It was easy to forget that I had a body. But the awareness of my immaterial self was correspondingly amplified, to several times its normal sensitivity; and it was to this immaterial area that I was feeling the loss of Ellen more keenly than the amputation of an arm and a leg together.

There was no relief from that feeling of loss except to concentrate on the expansion of my awareness. So, psychically, I pushed out and out, running from what I could not hear to face—and then, without warning, came rescue from an unexpected direction.

It was late afternoon, the sunlight slanting in at a low angle through the door to the roundhouse, which we had propped open while Porniarsk worked on the last console. Bill and I were the only other ones there. We had opened the door to let a little of the natural breeze and outer sun-warmth into the perfectly controlled climate of the interior; and in my case this had brought the thought of my outside cocooners with it, so that for a moment my mind had wandered again to thinking of Elloe.

I came back to awareness of the roundhouse, to see Bill and Porniarsk both looking at me. Porniarsk had just said something. I could hear the echo of it still on my ear, but without its meaning had vanished.

"What?" I asked.

"It's ready," said Porniarsk. "How do you feel—able to take this seventh assistance? You'll remember what I told you about the past increases not being limited? They each enlarge again with each new adaptation you make to the device. If you're near your limit of tolerance now, the effect of this last increase could be many times greater than what you're presently feeling, and you might find yourself crippled in this vital, nonphysical area before you've had time to pull yourself back from it."

"I know, I know," I said. "Go ahead."

"I will, then," said Porniarsk. He reached with one of his shoulder tentacles to the console half behind him, and touched a colored square.

For a second there was nothing. Then things began to expand, dramatically. I mean that literally. It was as if the sides of my head were rushing out and out, enclosing everything about me . . . the roundhouse, the peak, the village, the whole area between the mistwalls that now enclosed me, all the other areas touching that area, the contoured, the planet . . . there was no end. In addition, not only was I encompassing these things, but all of them were also growing and expanding. Not physically, but with meaning—acquiring many and many times their original aspects, properties, and values. So that I understood

all of them in three dimensions, as it were, where I before had never seen more than a single facet of their true shape. Now, seen this way, all of them—all things, including me—were interconnected.

So I found my way back. With the thought of interconnection, I was once more in The Dream, back to the spider web spanning the universe. Only now there were patterns to its strands. I read those patterns clearly, and they brought me an inner peace for the first time. Because at last I saw what I could do, and how to do it, to still the storm locally. Not just in this little section of the Earth around me, but all around our planet and moon and out into space for a distance beyond us, into the general temporal holocaust. I saw clearly that I would need more strength than I presently had; and the pattern I read showed that success would carry a price. A death-price. The uncaring laws of the philosophical universe in this situation could balance gain against loss in only one unique equation. And that equation involved a cost of life.

But I was not afraid of death, I told myself, if the results could be achieved. After all, in a sense I had been living on borrowed time since that first heart attack. I turned away from the patterns I was studying and looked deeper into the structure of the web itself, reaching for understanding of the laws by which it operated.

Gradually, that understanding came. Porniarsk had used the word "gestalt" in referring to that which he hoped I would perceive if I came to the situation here with a free and unprejudiced mind; and the word had jarred on me at the time. The avatar, we had all assumed, came from a race more advanced than ours—whether it was advanced in time or otherwise. I had taken it for granted that any twentieth-century human terms would be inadequate to explain whatever Porniarsk dealt with, and that he would avoid them for fear of creating misunderstandings.

Besides, "gestalt" came close to having been one of the cant words of twentieth-century psychology; the sort of word that had been used and misused by people I knew, who wanted to sound knowledgeable about a highly specialized subject they would never take the time to study properly and understand. Granted the avatar was probably using the human word nearest in meaning to

what he wanted to say, but I had still felt he could have explained himself in more hard-edged technical or scientific terms.

But then, later, he had also used the word "monad"; and, remembering that, I now began to comprehend one important fact. The forces of the time-storm and the device he was building so I could come to grips with them, belonged not so much to a physical, or even a psychological, but to a philosophical universe. I was far from understanding why this should be. In fact, with regard to the whole business, I was still like a child in kindergarten, learning about traffic lights without really comprehending the social and legal machinery behind the fact of their existence. But with the aid of the device, I had finally begun, at least, to get into the proper arena of perception.

Briefly and clumsily, in the area in which I would have to deal with the time-storm, the only monads—that is, the only basic, indestructible, building blocks or operators—were individual minds. Each monad was capable of reflecting or expressing the whole universe from its individual point of view. In fact, each monad had always potentially expressed it; but the ability to do so had always been a potential function, unless the individual monad-mind had possessed something like a device-of-assistance to implement or execute changes in what it expressed.

Of course, expressing a change in the universe and causing that change to take place was not quite as simple as wishing and making it so. For one thing, all monads involved in a particular expression of some part of the universe at a particular moment were also involved with each other, and had to be in agreement about any change they wished to express. For another, the change had to originate in the point of view of a monad capable of reflecting all the physical—not just the philosophical—universe, as plastic and controllable.

The time-storm itself was a phenomenon of the physical universe. In the limited terms to which Porniarsk was restricted by our language, he had explained to me that it was the result of isotropic anarchy. This expanding universe had continued its expansion until a point of intolerable strain on the network of forces that made up the spacetime fabric had been reached and

passed. Then, a breakdown had occurred. In effect, the space-time bubble had begun to disintegrate. Some of the galaxies that had been moving outward, away from each other and the universal center, producing a state of diminishing entropy, began in spot fashion to fall back, contracting the universe, creating isolated states of increasing entropy.

The conflict between opposed entropic states had spawned the time-storm. As Porniarsk had said, the storm as a whole was too massive for control by action of the monads belonging to our original time or even to his. But a delaying action could be fought. The forces set loose by the entropic conflict could be balanced against each other here and there, so slowing down the general anarchies enough to buy some breathing time, until the minds of those concerned with the struggle could develop more powerful forces to put in play across the connection between the philosophical and physical universes.

I was a single monad (though, of course, reinforced with the other seven at their altered consoles), and not a particularly capable one, basically. But I was also something of a freak, a lucky freak in that my freakiness apparently fitted the necessity of the moment. That was why I could think, as I was privately doing now, of creating an enclave in the time-storm that would include the whole Earth and its natural satellite, instead of merely an enclave containing just the few square miles surrounding us, which had been Porniarsk's hope.

"I'll need one more console adapted," I said to Porniarsk. "Don't worry, oow. I can handle it."

"But there's no one to sit at it," said Bill.

"That's correct," said Porniarsk, patiently. "There are only seven other adults in your party. I haven't any effectiveness as a monad. Neither has the little girl."

"She hasn't?" I looked hard at the avatar.

"Not . . . in effect," he said, with a rare second of hesitation. "A monad is required to have more than just a living intelligence and a personality. It has to have the capability of reflecting the universe. Wendy hasn't matured enough to do that. If you could ask her about it, and she could answer you, she'd say something to the effect that to her the universe isn't a defined entity. It's amorphous, unpredictable, capable of

changing and surprising her at any moment. For her, the universe as she now sees it is more like a god or devil than a mechanism of natural laws—something she's got oo hope of understanding or controlling."

"All right," I said. "I'll settle for the fact she's at least partially a monad."

"There's no such thing," said Porniarsk. "A monad either is, or is oot. In any case, even if she was a partial monad, a partial monad is incapable of helping you."

"What about when it's combined with another partial monad?"

"What other partial monad?" Bill asked.

"The Old Man, down at the village."

"This is even worse than your idea of using Wendy," said Porniarsk. For the first time since we'd met him, the tone of his voice came close to betraying irritation with one of us. "The experimentalists down below us are artificially created animals. The very concept of 'universe' is beyond them. They're only bundles of reflexes, conditioned and trained."

"All but one of them," I said. "Porniarsk, don't forget there's a lot of things I can see now with the help of the seven sets you've already produced, even if they don't have monads in connection with them yet. One of those things is that the Old Man may have been bred in a test tube—or whatever they all came from—but he's got some kind of concept of 'universe', even if it's limited to his village and a mile or so of the rock around it. When we first came in here, and passed the initial test of their attack, all the rest of them immediately took us for granted. Not the Old Man. By design or chance, he's got something individual to measure new things against, plus whatever it takes to make new decisions on the basis of that measurement. And you can't deny he's adult."

No one said anything for a moment.

"I don't think," said Bill, at last, "that Marie's going to like the idea of Wendy being hooked up to something like the Old Man."

"Wendy won't be. They'll both just be hooked in with all the rest of us. Anyway, I'll explain it to Marie."

"How'll you get the Old Man to cooperate?"

"He doesn't have to cooperate," I said. "I'll bring him up here, connect him to one of the consoles and chain

him to it with Sunday's chain. Then give him a day or two to get used to the feel of assistance and to his being in connection with my mind. Once he feels the advantages these things give him, my bet is he'll get over being scared and become interested."

"If you use force to bring him up here," said Porniarsk, "you'll undoubtedly trigger off the antagonisms of his fellow experimentalists."

"I think I can do it without," I said. "I've got an idea."

With that, I left the two of them and went back down to our camp, which was set up at the foot of the peak. I unchained Sunday and went looking for Marie. Sunday could only be trusted to stick around the camp when I was there. He had shown no particularly strong hunting instincts before in all the time I had known him; but for some reason the experimentalists seemed to fascinate him. Since the first day of our camp at the foot of the hill, when I had caught him stalking one of the village inhabitants who was out hunting among the rocks, we had kept him chained up when I was up on the peak. It was possible he might not have hurt the experimental, but the sight I had had of him, creeping softly along, belly almost dragging the ground and tail a-twitch, was too vivid to forget.

At any rate, now I let him loose, and he butted his head against me and rubbed himself against my legs all the time I was looking for Marie. I found her, with Wendy, down at the creek by the foot of the peak, doing some washing.

It was not the time to mention that I wanted Wendy at one of the consoles. The little girl had come to trust me; and—I don't care how male and solitary you are—if a small child decides to take to you, you have to carry your own instincts somewhere outside the normal spectrum not to feel some sort of emotional response. Anything unexpected or new tended to frighten Wendy; and any concern or doubt about it by her mother made the fright certain. The idea would have to be presented to Wendy gently, and with Marie's cooperation. I spoke to Marie now instead about the other matter I had in mind.

"Have you got any of that breadny left?" I asked.

She put down in a roaster pan some jeans of Wendy's she was wringing out,

and shook her hands to get the excess water off. She had her own slacks rolled up above her knees and her legs and feet bare so that she could wade into the creek. The work had pinkened her face and tousled her hair. She looked, not exactly younger, but more relaxed and bappier than usual; and for a second I felt sad that I had not been able to love her after all, instead of Ellen.

"What's the occasion?" she asked.

"No occasion," I said. "I'm hoping to bait the Old Man in the village down there, so I can get him up to the roundhouse. We want to try him with the consoles. You do have some brandy left?"

"Yes," she said. "How much do you want?"

"One full bottle ought to be plenty," I said. "Is there that much?"

"I've got several full bottles," she said. "Do you want it right away, or can I finish up here, first?"

"I'd like to get down to the village before dark."

"I'll be done in five minutes."

"Fine, then," I said and sat down on a boulder to wait. It took her closer to fifteen than five minutes, as it turned out, but there was still at least an hour or so of sunset left. We went back to the camper, she got me an unopened bottle of brandy, and I walked down to the village with it.

The whole thing was a gamble. I had no idea what kind of body chemistry the experimentals had. From what Porniarsk had said, they had evidently been developed by future humans from ape stock; chimpanzees at a guess. The larger part of their diet seemed to be some sort of artificially prepared eatable in a cube form, that came from in side one of the dome-shaped buildings. But since the building was small, and the supply of the cubes seemed to be inexhaustible, I had guessed that there was some kind of underground warehouse to which the building was merely an entrance. However, in addition to the cubes, the experimentals were at least partly carnivorous. They went out into the rocks around the village in the daytime to hunt small rodentlike animals with their throwing knives, and these they either ate raw on the spot or carried back into their buildings at the village, evidently to be eaten, at leisure, inside there.

All these things seemed to add up to the strong possibility they had digestive systems and metabolisms pretty similar

to a human's. But there was no way of being sure. All I could do was try.

The Old Man was not out in the open when I first walked into the village, but before I was half a dozen steps down the main street, he had emerged from his dwelling to hunker down in front of his doorway and stare at me steadily as I approached. I detoured along the way to pick up a couple of handleless cups or small bowls that one of the local workmen was turning out on his machine. I'd thought earlier of bringing a couple of containers from our camp, then decided the Old Man would be more likely to trust utensils that were familiar to him. I came up to within ten feet of him, sat down cross-legged on the hard-packed, stony dirt of the street, and got my bottle from the inner jacket pocket in which I had been carrying it.

I put both cups down, poured a little brandy into both of them, picked up one, sipped from it and started staring back at him.

It was not the most lively cocktail hour on record. I pretended to drink, pouring as little as possible into my cup each time, and putting somewhat more into the other cup, which slowly began to fill. The Old Man kept staring at me; apparently, he was capable of keeping it up without blinking as long as the daylight lasted. Eventually, even the small amounts of liquor with which I was wetting my tongue began to make themselves felt. I found myself talking. I told the Old Man what fine stuff it was I was drinking, and I invited him to help himself. I speculated on the interesting discoveries he would make if he only joined me and became friendly.

He continued to stare.

Eventually, the other cup was as full as it could safely be and the sun was almost down. There was nothing more I could do. I left the cups and the bottle with the top off, and got to my feet.

"Pleasant dreams," I said to him, and left. Back once more in the rocks a safe distance from the village, I got out my field glasses and peered down in the direction of his building. It was almost dark, and one thing the experimentals did not have was artificial lighting. They all disappeared into their buildings at dusk and only reappeared with the dawn. But by straining my vision now, I was able to make out a dim figure still in front of the Old Man's building. I squinted through the binoculars, my eyes beginning to water; and, just as I

was about to give up, I caught a tiny glint of light on something moving.

It was the bottle, being upended in the general area of the Old Man's head. I gave an inward, silent whoop of joy. Unless he had decided to use the brandy for a shampoo, or unless he turned out to have a body that reacted to alcohol as if it was so much branch water, I had him.

I waited until the moon came up, then got the pickup and drove by moonlight down through the main street of the village to the Old Man's building. I took an unlit flashlight and went in the building entrance. Inside, I turned the flashlight on, and found the Old Man. He was curled up in the corner of the single room that was the building's interior, on a sort of thick rug. He reeked of brandy, and he was dead to the world.

He was also no lightweight. I had not thought it to look at him, for all the experimentals looked small and skinny by human standards; but apparently they were nothing but bone and muscle. Still, I managed to carry him out to the pickup and get him inside the cab. Then I drove back out of the village, to the camp.

At the camp, I took him out of the pickup, unchained Sunday and put him in the pickup, put the chain and collar on the Old Man and lifted him, still snoring, into one of the of the jeeps. By this time, I was surrounded by people wanting to know what I was doing.

"I want to try him out on the equipment at the roundhouse," I said. "He drank almost a full bottle of brandy and he ought to sleep until morning, but with all this noise he may just wake up. Now, will you let me get him put away up there? Then I'll come down and tell you all about it."

"We already had dinner," said Wendy.

"Hush," said Marie to her, "Marc'll have his dinner when he gets back. You're coming right back down?"

"In twenty minutes at the outside," I said.

I turned on the lights of the jeep and growled up the hillside in low gear. The partitions between the consoles had supports that were anchored in the concrete floor of the roundhouse; and I chained the sleeping Old Man to one of these. As an afterthought, I took from the jeep the canteen of drinking water we always kept with each of the vehicles, and left it beside him. If he got drunk like a human, he was likely to

have a hangover like a human.

Then I growled my way back down again to the camp, to turn Sunday loose, answer questions, and have my dinner.

To everybody except Porniarsk and Bill, who already knew what I had in mind, I explained my capture of the Old Man with a half truth, saying I wanted to see if he could be useful as a partial monad when we tried to use the equipment in the roundhouse, the day after tomorrow. It was not until later that evening, in the privacy of the camper, after Wendy was asleep, that I talked to Marie about using the little girl at one of the consoles. Surprisingly, Marie thought it was a very good idea. She said Wendy had no one to play with but the dogs, and she had been wanting badly to get in on what the adults were doing.

I slept that night, but I did not rest. As soon as I closed my eyes I was off among the strands of the spiderweb, riding the shifting forces of the time-storm about our world. I scuttled about, studying them. I already knew what I would have to do. Every so often, for a transitory moment, the forces in this area I had chosen came close to a situation of internal balance. If, at just the right moment, I could throw all the force controlled by the eight other monads and myself against the tangle of conflicting forces that was the storm, hopefully I could nudge this tiny corner of the storm into a state of dynamic balance.

Why do I say "hopefully"? I knew I could do it—if only Woody and the Old Man under the assistance of the device would give me amplification enough to act as an eighth monad. For it was not power I needed, but understanding. As clearly as I could see the forces now, I needed to see them many times more clearly, in much finer detail. Close in, focused down to the local area which was all that Porniarsk had envisioned me bringing into balance, my vision was sharp enough. But on wider focus, when I looked further out into the time-storm, the fine detail was lost. One more monad and I could bring those distant, fuzzy forces into clarity.

It was merely a matter of waiting until morning. I told myself, finally, and made myself put the whole problem out of my head. At my bidding, it went; which was something such a problem would never have done, a week before.

But then another thought came to perch on my mind like a black crow.

I was aware I had never been what the world used to call a kind or moral man, a "good" man, as my grandfather would have said. I had always let myself do pretty much what I wanted, within practical limits; and I had never been particularly caring, or concerned for other people. But ethical laws are a part of any philosophical universe; they have to be. And was it entirely in agreement with those laws, now, my carrying these eight other people—nice, if you counted the Old Man as being in the people category—into a joust with something as monstrous as the time-storm, only because of my own hunger to know and do?

Granted, I could not see any one in which they could be hurt. The only one I was putting on the line, as far as I knew, was myself. But there are always understandings beyond understandings. Perhaps there was some vital bit of information I did not have.

On the other hand, perhaps that was not really what was bothering me. I looked a little deeper into myself and found the real fishhook in my conscience; the unanswered question of whether, even if I knew there was real danger to the others, I would let that be reason enough to stop me. Perhaps I would go ahead anyway, prepared to sacrifice them to my own desires, my own will.

This question was harder to put out of my mind than the time-storm problem, but to the end, I managed. I lay, open-eyed and without moving, until the dawn whitened the shade drawn over the window on the side of the camper across from the bunk on which I lay with Marie.

I got up and dressed quietly. Marie slept on, but Wendy opened her eyes and looked at me.

"Go back to sleep," I told her. She closed her eyes again, without argument. (Probably only humoring me, I thought.)

Dressed, I glanced at Marie, half-tempted to wake her and say a few words to her. But there was no good reason for that, I realized, unless I only wanted to leave her with some enigmatic but portentous statement she could remember afterwards and worry over, wondering if she could have done something more for me in some way, and

things might have been different. I was a little ashamed of myself; and let myself out of the camper as softly as I could.

Outside, the morning air was dry and cold. I shivered, even under the leather jacket I was wearing, and fired up the Coleman stove to make a pot of coffee. All the time I was making it, I could feel the Old Man's presence in the back of my mind. He was connected to the console, which meant he was in connectioo with me. I could feel that he was awake now and suffering from the hangover I had anticipated. The discomfort was making him savage—I could tell that, too. But underneath the savagery he was beginning to wonder a little at what his mind could now sense of me, and through me, of the larger universe.

I made my coffee, drank it, and drove one of the jeeps to the roundhouse. Inside, around where the Old Man had been, it was a mess. He had been sick—I should have thought of the possibility of that. In addition, he had urinated copiously.

I cleaned up, cautiously. Now that he was awake, I had enough respect for those apelike arms of his not to let him get a grip on me. But he let me work in until I was right next to him, without making any move in my direction. He was still staring at me all the time, but now there was a speculative gleam in his brown eyes. He had now realized who it was his mind was connected to. I could feel him in my head, exploring the connection and the situation. I had guessed right. Now, he was interested. But his mind was still alien to me, much more alien than Porniarsk's.

I took a chance, disconnected him from the console, unhooked his chain from the stanchion, and led him outside to ensure that any further eliminations he was moved to would take place somewhere else than in the roundhouse. I found a boulder too heavy for him to move and with a lower half that was narrower than the top, so that the loop of chain I locked around it could not be pulled off over the top. I retrained him to this. The boulder was on the far side of the roundhouse so that he could neither see his village or be seen from it, assuming that his fellows down there had distance vision good enough to pick him out. Then I left him with some bread, an opened can of corned beef and a refilled canteen of water, and went down to my own breakfast. He let

me go without a sound, but his eyes followed me with their speculative look as long as I was in sight. All the way down the mountain, I could feel his mind trying to explore mine.

Once back at the camp, I got out the binoculars and looked over the village. Its inhabitants were out of their homes and about their daily activities. None of them seemed to be missing the Old Man or showing any curiosity about the lack of his presence. That much was all right, then. I went back, put the binoculars away and ate breakfast. All the others were up and also breakfasting; but there was a tension, a taut feeling, in the very air of the camp.

I did not feel like talking to anyone; and the rest seemed to understand this. They left me alone while I was eating—all but Sunday, who clearly sensed that something unusual was up. He did not rub against me in his usual fashion, but prowled around and around me, his tail twitching as if his nerves were on fire. He made such an ominous demonstration that I was alarmed for Bill when at last he started to come toward me.

But Sunday drew back just enough to let him get close, although he circled the two of us, eyeing Bill steadily and making little occasional singing noises in his throat.

"I don't want to bother you," Bill said. His voice was hardly more than a murmur, too low for any of the others to overhear.

"It's all right," I said. "What is it?"

"I just wanted you to know," he said, "you can count on me."

"Well," I said, "thanks."

"No, I really mean *count* on me," he insisted.

"I hear you," I said. "Thanks. But all you'll have to do today is sit at that console and let me use you."

He looked back at me for a second in a way that was almost as keyed-up and strange as Sunday's present behavior.

"Right," he said and went off.

I had no time to puzzle over him. There was Sunday to get into the cab of the pickup and the doors safely closed on him; and the leopard was just not agreeable to going in, this morning. In the end I had to haul him in as a dead weight, swearing at him, with one fist closed on the scruff off his neck and my other arm around his wedge-shaped chest below his forelegs. I didn't dare have any of the others help me in the mood the leopard was in—even the girl.

Though, in fact, she was busy at the moment, doing something in the motor home with Marie—and she probably would not have come anyway, if I'd called.

I finally got Sunday in and the door closed. Immediately he found himself trapped; he began to thrash around and call to me. I closed my ears to the sounds he was making and got my party into the jeeps and headed up the side of the peak. I was already at work with the back of my head, monitoring the present interplay of the forces in the storm, as far as I could pick them out. A real picture of the pattern out as far as the Moon's orbit would have to wait until the others were all at their consoles and connected with me. I thought I was gaining some advantage from them already, which was a very good sign. Either I had been building psychic muscle since the last two consoles had been finished, or the Old Man was proving to be even more useful than I had hoped. Actually, in one way he had already exceeded expectations, because I was still as strongly linked to him as I had been when he had been connected to the console and chained inside the roundhouse.

Wendy, who had been chattering away, merry and bright in the back of the jeep I was driving, fell into dubious silence as we pulled up on to the level spot where the roundhouse stood and she saw the Old Man staring at us. But he only gave her and the others a single surveying glance and then came back to concentrate on me as I got out of the jeep and came back toward him.

He knew where I was going to take him. He came along almost eagerly when I unlocked the chain and led him to the roundhouse door. It slid aside automatically as we got within arm's length of it, and he went over the threshold ahead of me with a bound, headed toward his console. I took him to it and chained him on a short length of the chain so that he could not reach around the partition to whoever would be at the console next to him.

Bill followed me in and blocked the door open to the outer air as we had gotten in the habit of doing. The others followed him. They began to take their places under Porniarsk's direction and let themselves be connected to their console. The dark material clung to itself when one end of it was loosely wrapped around the throat. The further end of it reached through the face of the console

to touch the pattern of blocks inside. It was so simple as to seem unbelievable, except for the fact that the strap had a mild, built-in warmth to it. It was a semiliving thing, Porniarsk had told me. All the connections in the roundhouse were made with such semiliving objects. They operated like psychic channels. If you imagine the tube through which a blood transfusion is being given as being alive and capable of making its own connection with the blood systems of the two people involved in the transfusion, you have an analogous picture.

The straps were vaguely comforting to wear, like a security blanket. I noticed Wendy brighten up for the first time since seeing the Old Man, when hers was wrapped around her throat by Bill. There was one waiting for me at the monitoring station in the middle of the room; but I wanted to try seeing what kind of connection I could have with the other monads without it, before I strapped myself in.

Bill and Porniarsk strapped in the others, then Bill strapped himself in and Porniarsk went to the monitoring station. He reached with one tentacle for the colored square on the console there that activated all connections. His tentacle flicked down to touch the square and the connection already established between myself and the Old Man suddenly came alive with our mutual understanding of what would happen when activation took place.

The Old Man howled.

His vocal capabilities were tremendous. All of us in the roundhouse were half-deafened by the sound which rang like a fire siren in our ears, and broadcast itself outward from the propped-open door. In that same second, Porniarsk's tentacle touched the surface of the square and the connections were activated. Full contact with all the other monads there erupted around me, and full perception of the time-force forces out of Moon-orbit distance smashed down on me like a massive wall of water. The Old Man's bowl was cut off in mid-utterance. I found my body running for the roundhouse door.

For with contact had come full understanding of what the Alpha Prime had done, and what he had been trying to do. I burst out of the roundhouse and looked down the steep, bouldered face of the peak that fell toward the village. The lower edge of it was alive with black, climbing bodies.



How the Old Man had contacted them, I did not know. His connection with me and the console had made it possible, that was obvious, but he had used channels of identity with his own people that were not part of my own, human machinery. The most I could understand was that he had not actually called them, in a true sense. He had only been able to provoke an uneasiness in them that had sent most of them out hunting among the lower rocks in the direction of the peak.

But now they had heard him. Lost somewhere in the gestalt of the monad group of which he and I were a part—Poniarsk had been right in his use of that word, for the group, myself and this place were all integrated into a whole, now—the Old Man's mind was triumphant. He knew that he had called in time, that his people had heard and were coming.

I whirled around and stared back into the roundhouse through the open door, though I already knew what I would see. Inside, all the figures were motionless

and silent. There was not even a chest-movement of breathing to be seen in any of them, for they were caught in a timeless moment—the moment in which we had contacted the storm and I had paused to examine the pattern of its forces. Even Poniarsk was frozen into immobility with his tentacle-tip touching his activation square on the monitor console. The square itself glowed now, with a soft, pink light.

I was still unconnected and mobile. But the Old Man's people would be here in twenty minutes; and all our weapons were down at the camp.

I watched my body turn and run for the nearest jeep, leap into it, start it, turn it, and get it going down the slope toward camp. I had the advantage of a vehicle, but the distance was twice as much, down to camp, than it was up the slope the experimentals were climbing, and twice as far back up again. The jeep bounced and slid down the shallower slope on this side of the peak, skidding and slewing around the larger boulders in the way. My body drove it; but my

mind could not stay with it, because I had already seen enough of the present moment's pattern to locate the upcoming pressure point I searched for. That pressure point would be coming into existence in no more time than it would take the villagers to climb to the roundhouse, possibly even in less time. I had only that long to study all the force lines involved and make sure that my one chance to produce a state of balance was taken exactly on the mark.

It was not the pattern of forces in the time-storm itself studied; but the image of this pattern in the philosophical universe during that fractional, timeless moment when I had first tapped the abilities of our full monad-gestalt. That image was like a three-dimensional picture taken by a camera with a shutter speed beyond imagination. Already, of course, the configuration of the forces in the storm had developed through a whole series of changes into totally different patterns, and they were continuing to change. But with the gestalt and the device to back me up, I could study

the configuration that had been and calculate how the later patterns would be at any other moment in the future.

In any such pattern—past, present, or future—the time-storm forces of any given area had to have the potential of developing into a further state of dynamic balance. The potential alone, however, was not good enough. To begin with, the forces had to be very close to balance, within a very small tolerance indeed, otherwise, the relatively feeble strength of my gestalt would not be able to push them into balance.

But first, the imbalances to be corrected must be understood in detail. Balance was an ideal state; and the chances of it occurring naturally were as small as the total time-storm itself was large. The only reason it was barely possible to achieve it artificially lay in a characteristic of the time-storm itself; the storm's tendency to break up progressively into smaller and smaller patterns, and for these to break up in turn, and so on. This was the same characteristic that Poniarsk had mentioned as

presenting the greatest danger of the storm if it was not fought and opposed. The continuing disintegration would continue to produce smaller and smaller temporal anomalies until at last any single atomic particle would be existing at a different temporal moment than its neighbor. But in this case it offered an advantage, in that the disintegration process produced smaller temporal anomalies within larger ones, like miniature hurricanes in the calms that were the eyes of larger ones; and so, by choosing the right moment to act, it was possible to balance the forces of a small, contained anomaly, without having to deal with the continuing imbalanced forces of a larger disturbance containing it.

Of course, the word "hurricane" did not really convey the correct image of a temporal anomaly. In its largest manifestation, such an anomaly represented the enormous forces released in intergalactic space along the face of contact between an expanding galaxy and a contracting one. Here on Earth, in its

smallest—so far—manifestation, it was an area such as the one we and the experimentals were inhabiting now, with the conflicting forces existing where the mistwalls marked their presence. Temporally, the mistwalls were areas of tremendous activity. Physically, as we had discovered, they were no more than bands of lightly disturbed air and suspended dust, stretching up from the surface of the Earth until they came into conflict with other forces of their same "hurricanes."

In my philosophical image of the apparent walls that were time-storm force-lines, I saw them in cross-section so that they seemed like a web of true lines filling a three-dimensional space, the interstices between lines being the chunks of four-dimensional space they enclosed. Seen close up, the lines looked less like threads than like rods of lightning frozen in the act of striking. Whatever this appearance represented of their real properties in the physical universe, the fact was clear that they moved and were moved by the other force-lines

with which they interacted, so that they developed continually from one pattern to another in constant rearrangement under the push of the current imbalance.

I already knew in what general direction the patterns in the area I was concerned with were developing. But now I projected these developments, studying the parade of succeeding configurations for specific details, looking for one that would give me a possibility of forcing a balanced pattern into existence before the experimentals arrived at the roundhouse. I could not do this until I had returned with weapons and driven off the black figures now climbing the peak, for the good reason that the pattern showed me the development of affairs here, as well as the larger picture. I alone, even with guns, would not be able to drive off those who were coming. There were more than a hundred of them; and this time they would not give up as easily as they had before. They had been conditioned to ignore the roundhouse. Now, somehow, the Old Man had managed to break that conditioning. The only thing that would stop them would be fright at some great natural event. A volcanic eruption, an earthquake—or the meteorological reaction when the mistwall through which we had entered went out of existence, and the atmosphere of the area on its far side suddenly mixed with the atmosphere on this.

I must get down, get weapons, get back up, and hold them off long enough to use the gestalt successfully to produce balance in the pattern. My mind galloped past the developing patterns, checking, checking, checking; and as it went, the jeep under me was skidding and plunging down the slope to our camp.

I slid in between our tents at last in a cloud of dust and stopped. I jumped out of the jeep, unlocked the door of the motor home, and plunged inside.

Warm from the hot, still atmosphere within, the guns were where we always kept them, in the broom closet with the ammunition on a shelf above. I grabbed two shotguns and the two heaviest rifles, with ammo. But when I reached for the machine pistol, it was not there.

I spent perhaps a couple of frantic minutes, looking for it in improbable places about the motor home, before I finally admitted to myself that it was gone. Who could have managed to get into the vehicle, which Marie and I kept locked religiously except when one of us

was in it, was something there was no time to puzzle about now. With its extendable stock collapsed, the weapon was light and small enough to be carried under a heavy piece of outer clothing by either man or woman—and most of us going up to the roundhouse this morning had worn either a jacket or a bulky sweater. I got out of the motor home in a hurry, not even bothering to lock it behind me. I made the driver's seat of the jeep in one jump, gunned the still-running motor and headed back up the slope of the peak.

I was perhaps a hundred and fifty yards from the camp when the dead silence that had existed there, registered on me. Sunday had been back there all the time I was getting the guns, locked up in the cab of the pickup. But I had not heard a sound from him, in spite of the fact he must have heard the jeep arrive, and seen, heard, and possibly even smelled me. He should have been putting up as much racket as he could in an effort to make me come and let him out. But there had been no noise at all.

I drove another twenty yards or so, before I gave in to the suddenly empty, sick feeling inside me. Then, I wrenched the jeep around and roared back down to the camp, to the pickup.

I did not need to get out of the jeep to look at it. I did not even need to get close. From twenty feet away, I could see the windshield of the pickup lying on the hood of the vehicle like a giant's lost spectacle lens. Somehow, Sunday had managed to pop it completely out of its frame. And he was gone.

I knew where he was gone. I got the field glasses and looked off up the steep slope leading directly to the roundhouse, where the tiny black figures of the experimentals could now be seen more than halfway up. Down below them I saw nothing for a moment—and then there was a flash of movement. It was Sunday, headed to join me on top where he must have believed me to be, not travelling by the roundabout, easy slope I had come down in the jeep, but directly up the mountainside on a converging route with those from the village below.

He would keep coming. If the experimentals did not get in his way, he would simply pass them up. But if they tried to stop him, he would kill as long as he could until he was killed himself. But he would keep coming.

The idiotic, loving beast! There was

nothing but death for him where he was headed; but even if he had known that, it would not have stopped him. There was nothing I could do for him now. I could not even take time out to think of him. There were eight people and a world to think of.

I ripped the jeep around and headed up the slope. The best I could do. The longer distance before me would make it a tossup whether I could get back to the roundhouse before the experimentals arrived.

I had the upcoming patterns of the time-storm in my head now. I could see the one I wanted developing. It was not an absolutely sure thing, so far, but it was as close to a sure thing as I could wish for in limited time such as we had now. It would form within seconds after I made the top of the peak and the roundhouse.

There was nothing more I could do now, but drive. In the roundhouse the others were still immobile—even the Old Man—caught up in the gestalt. I gave most of my attention to the ground ahead.

It was the best driving I had ever done. I was tearing hell out the jeep, but if it lasted to the top of the peak that was all I asked of it. I did not lose any time, but what I gained—the best I could gain—was only seconds. When I did reach the level top and the roundhouse, at last, the experimentals were not yet there.

I skidded the jeep to a stop beside the door of the roundhouse and tossed one rifle, one shotgun, and most of the ammunition inside. Then I pulled the block that was holding the door open—and all this time the storm pattern I was waiting for was coming up in my mind—stepped back, and the door closed automatically. The experimentals did not have doors to buildings. Perhaps they did not know what a door was and would think, seeing this one closed, that there was no entrance into the roundhouse. If they did by accident trigger the door to opening, those inside would have the other two guns which one way or the other they would be awake and ready to use, for in a moment I would either win or lose and the gestalt would be set free again.

I watched the door close and turned just in time to see the first round, apple-head come over the edge of the cliff-edge, some forty yards away. I snatched up the rifle and had it halfway to my

shoulder when I realized I would never fire it. There was no time now. The moment and the pattern I waited for were rushing down upon me. I had no more mind to spare for killing. Still standing with the rifle half raised, I went back into the pattern; meanwhile, as if through the wrong end of a telescope, I was seeing the black figure come all the way up into view and advance, and other black figures appear one by one behind him, until there were four of them coming steadily toward me, not poling the knives they held to throw, but holding them purposely by the hilt, as if they wanted to make sure of finishing me off.

It was the final moment. I saw the pattern I had waited for ready to be born. I felt the strength of my monad gestalt; and at last I knew certainly that what I was about to try would work. The four experimentals were more than halfway to me; and now I could understand clearly how the indications I had read had been correct. I would be able to do what I had wanted; and with the windstorm that would follow the disappearance of the mistwalls, the experimentals would panic and retreat. But the cost of all this would be my life. I had expected it to be so.

I stood waiting for the experimentals, the pattern rushing down upon me. In the last seconds a different head poked itself over the edge of the cliff, and a different body came leaping toward me. It was Sunday, too late.

The pattern I awaited exploded into existence. I thrust, with the whole gestalt behind me. The fabric of the time-storm about me staggered, trembled and fell together—locked into a balance of forces. And awareness of all things vanished from me, like the light of a blowout lamp.

The world came back to me, little by little. I was conscious of a warm wind blowing across me. I could feel it on my face and hands, I could feel it tugging at my clothes. It was stiff, but no hurricane. I opened my eyes and saw streamers of cloud torn to bits scudding across the canovas of a blue sky, moving visibly as I watched. I felt the hard and pebbled ground under my body and head; and a pressure, like a weight, on the upper part of my right thigh.

I sat up. I was alive—and unhurt. Before me, out beyond the cliff-edge where the experimentals had appeared, there was no more mistwall; only sky

and distant, very distant, landscape. I looked down and saw the four black bodies on the ground, strung out almost in a line. They oome of them moved; and when I looked closer I saw clearly how badly they had been torn by teeth and claws. I looked further down, yet, at the weight on my thigh, and saw Sunday.

He lay with his head stretched forward, to rest on my leg, and one of the leaf-shaped knives was stuck, half-buried in the big muscle behind his left shoulder. Behind him there was perhaps fifteen feet of bloody trail where he had half crawled, half dragged himself to me. His jaws were partly open, the teeth and gums red-stained with blood that was not his own. His eyes were closed. The lids did not stir, nor his jaws move. All his body lay still.

"Sunday?" I said. But he was not there to hear me.

There was nothing I could do. I picked up his torn head somehow in my arms and held it to me. There was just nothing I could do. I closed my own eyes and sat there holding him for, I think, quite a while. Finally there were sounds around me. I opened my eyes again and looked up to see that the others, released now that the gestalt was ended, had come out of the roundhouse and were standing around looking at the new world. Marie was standing over me.

Tek and Ellen were off by themselves some thirty yards from the roundhouse. He had turned the jeep around and evidently pulled it off a short distance in a start back down the side of the peak. But for some reason he had stopped again and was now getting back out of the driver's seat, holding one of the rifles, probably the one I had thrown into the roundhouse, tucked loosely in the crook of his right elbow, barrel down. Ellen was already out of the jeep and standing facing him a few steps off.

"You go," she was saying to him. "I can't now. He doesn't even have Sunday, now."

I remembered how much Sunday had meant to her in those first days after I had found her. And how he had put up with her more than I ever would have expected. But she had always been fond of him. And I—I had taken him for granted. Because he was mad. Crazy, crazy, insane cat. But what difference does it make why the love's there, as long as it is? Only I'd never known how much of my own heart I'd given back to him until this day and hour.

Ellen was walking away from Tek and the jeep, now.

"Come back," Tek said to her.

She did not answer. She walked past me and into the roundhouse through the door that was once more propped open. In the relative shadow of the artificially lit interior she seemed to vanish.

Tek's face twisted and went savage. "Don't try anything," said Bill's voice, tightly.

I looked to the other side of me and saw him there. He was pale-faced, but steady, holding one of the shotguns. The rage was a little looser for accuracy with a shotgun but Bill held it purposefully.

"Get out if you want," he told Tek. "But don't try anything."

Tek seemed to sag all over. His shoulders drooped, the rifle barrel sagged downward. All the savageness leaked out of him, leaving him looking defenseless.

"All right," he said, in an empty voice.

He started to turn away toward the jeep. Bill sighed and let the shotgun drop butt downward to the earth so that he held it, almost leaning on the barrel of it wearily. Tek turned back, suddenly, the rifle barrel coming up to point at me.

Bill snatched up the shotgun, too slowly. But in the same second there was the yammer of the machine pistol from inside the roundhouse and Ellen walked out again holding the weapon and firing as she advanced. Tek, flung backward by the impact of the slugs, bounced off the side of the jeep and slid to the ground, the rifle tumbling from his hands.

Ellen walked a good dozen steps beyond me. But then she slowed and stopped. Tek was plainly dead. She dropped the machine pistol as if her hands had forgotten they held it; and she turned to come back to me.

Marie had been standing unmoving, close to me all this time. But when Ellen was only a step or two away, Marie moved back and away out of my line of vision. Ellen knelt beside me and put her arms around both me and the silent head I was still holding.

"It'll be all right," she said. "It's all going to be all right. You wait and see."



and far too miserable to seem like foes. Ourp, smiling serenely, later brought them bot chowder, while the west wind cleared the sky. (Regarding the winds, at the moment of decision the west wind had spilled south, blowing out all along the east coast of Rime Isle, and the east wind had spilled north, driving away from the whole west coast of the island, while the belt of storm between had rotated clockwise somewhat, causing wild, veering whirlwinds in the Deathlands.)

At the same instant as the Mouser slung the queller-brand, Fafhrd was standing on the seaward turf-wall of Cold Harbor, confronting the Widder-Mingol fleet as it neared the beach, and brandishing his sword. This was no mere barbarian gesture of defiance, but part of a carefully thought-out demonstration done in the hope of awing the Sea-Mingols, even though Fafhrd admitted (to himself only) that the hope was a forlorn one. Earlier, when the three Mingol advance-raiders had departed the beach, they had made no move to join with or await their fleet, although they surely must have sighted its sails, but had instead rowed steadily away south as long as eye followed. This had made Fafhrd wonder whether they had not taken some fright on the isle which they had not wanted to face again, even with the backing of their main force. In this connection he had particularly remembered the cries of woe and dread that had come from the Mingols as Groniger's Rime Islers had topped the rise and hove into their view. Afreyt had confided to him how during the long march overland those same countrymen of hers had come to seem monstrous to her and somehow bigger, and he had had to admit that they made the same strange impression on him. And if they seemed bigger (and monstrous) to him and her, how much bigger might they not appear to Mingols?

And so they had taken thought together, Fafhrd and Afreyt, and had made suggestions and given commands (supplemented by bullyings and blandishments as needed) and as a result Groniger's relief-force was posted at intervals of twenty paces in a long line that began far up on the glacier and continued along the ramparts of Cold Harbor and along the rise and stretched off for almost a league south of the settlement, each Isler brandishing his pike or other weapon. While betwixt and between them all along were stationed the defenders of Cold Harbor (their country-

men, though lacking their aura of monstrosity) and Fafhrd's berserks, to swell their sheer numbers and also to keep the Salthaven Islers at their posts, from which they still had a dreamy, automatonlike tendency to go marching off. Midmost on the broad ramparts of Cold Harbor, widely flanked by Groniger and another pike-waver, rested Odin's litter with the gallows propped over it as in the Deathlands, while around it were stationed Fafhrd, Afreyt, and the three girls, the last waving their red cloaks on long rakes like flags. (Anything for effect, Fafhrd had said, and the girls were eager to play their part in the demonstration.) Afreyt had a borrowed spear while Fafhrd alternately shook his sword and the cords of the five nooses drawn around his left hand—shook them at the massed Mingol ships nearing the harbor. Groniger and the other Islers were shouting Gale's (or Odin's) doom-chaot: "Doom! Kill the Mingols! Doom! Die the heroes."

And then (just as, on the other side of Rime Isle, the Mouser hurled his queller-brand, as has been said) the whirlwinds betokening the reversal of gales moved across them northward, whipping the red flags, and the heavens were darkened and there came the thunder of Hellfire erupting in sympathy with Darkfire and the sea was troubled and soon pocked to the north by the ejecta of Hellgolg, great rocks that fell into the waves like the shouted "Doom! Doom!" of the chant in a great cannonading. And the Widder-Mingol fleet was retreating out to sea under the urging of the wind that now blew off the shore—away, away from that dreadful burning coast that appeared to be guarded by a wall of giants taller than trees and by all the powers of the four elements. And Hellfire's smoke stretched out above them like a pall.

But before that had all transpired (in fact, at the same instant as, a hundred leagues east, a black rainbow or waterspout shot up to the sky from the whirlpool's center) Odin's litter began to rock and toss on the ramparts, and the heavy gallows to twitch and strain upward like a straw or like a compass needle responding to an unknown upward magnetism—and Afreyt screamed as she saw Fafhrd's left hand turn black before her eyes. And Fafhrd bellowed with sudden agony as he felt the nooses May had braided (and decorated with flowers) tighten relentlessly about his wrist as so many steel wires, contracting deeper and deeper between arm bones and wrist bones, cutting skin and flesh,

parting gristle and tendons and all tenderer stuff, while that hand was resistlessly dragged upward. And then the curtains of the litter all shot up vertically and the gallows stood up on its beam end and vibrated and something black and gleaming shot up to the sky, boling the clouds, and Fafhrd's black severed hand and all the nooses went with it.

Then the curtains fell back and the gallows crashed from the wall and Fafhrd stared stupidly at the blood pouring from the stump that ended his left arm. Mastering her horror, Afreyt clamped her fingers on the spouting arteries and bid May, who was nearest at hand, take knife and slash up the skirt of her white smock for bandages, which the girl did, and with them folded in wads and also used as ties, Afreyt bowed up Fafhrd's great wound in its own blood and staunching the flow of that while he watched black-faced. When it was done, he muttered, "A bead for a bead and a hand for a hand," she said, and Afreyt retorted sharply, "Better a hand than a head—or five."

In its cramping sphere Khakhit of the Black Ice smote the sharply curving walls in its fury and tried to scratch Rime Isle off the map and ground together the pieces representing Fafhrd and the Mouser and the rest between its opposed horny black palms and scrambled frantically for the pieces standing for the two intrusive gods—but those two pieces were gone. While in far Stardock, maimed Prince Faroomfar slept more easily, knowing himself avenged.

A full two months after the events before-narrated Afreyt had a modest fish-dinner in her low-eaved, violet-tinted house on the north edge of Salthaven, to which were invited Groniger, Skor, Pshawri, Rill, old Ourp, and of course Cif, the Gray Mouser, and Fafhrd—the largest number her table would accommodate without undue crowding. The occasion was the Mouser's sailing on the morrow in *Seahawk* with Skor, the Mingols, Mikkidu, and three others of his original crew on a trading venture to No-ombrusk with goods selected (purchased and otherwise accumulated) chiefly by Cif and himself. He and Fafhrd were sorely in need of money to pay for dockage on their vessels, crew wages, and many another expense, while the two ladies were no better off, owing yet-to-be-finally-determined sums to the council—of which, however, they were still

members, as yet. Fafhrd had to travel no distance at all to get to the feast, for he was guesting with Afreyt while he convalesced from his maiming—just as the Mouser was staying at Cif's place on no particular excuse at all. There had been raised eyebrows at these arrangements from the rather straight-laced Islers, which the four principals had handled by firmly overlooking them.

During the course of the dinner, which consisted of oyster chowder, salmon baked with Island leeks and herbs, corn cakes made of costly Lankmar grain, and light wine of Ilthmar, conversation had ranged around the recent volcanic eruptions and attendant and merely coincidental events, and their consequences, particularly the general shortage of money. Salthaven had suffered some damage from the earthquake and more from the resultant fire. The council hall had survived but the Salt Herring tavern had been burned to the ground with its Flame Den. ("Loki was a conspicuously destructive god," the Mouser observed, "especially where his meter, fire, was involved." "It was an unsavory haunt," Groniger opined.) In Cold Harbor, three turf roofs had collapsed, unoccupied of course because everyone had been taking part in the defensive demonstration at the time. The Salthaven Islers had begun their homeward journey next day, the litter being used to carry Fafhrd. "So some mortal got some use of it besides the girls," Afreyt remarked. "It was a haunted-seeming conveyance," Fafhrd allowed, "but I was feverish."

But it was the short store of cash, and the contrivances adopted to increase that, which they chiefly talked about. Skor had found work for himself and the other berserks for a while helping the Islers harvest drift-timber from the Beach of Bleached Bones, but there had not been the anticipated glut of Mingol wrecks. Fafhrd talked of manning *Flotsam* with some of his men and bringing back from Ool Plerms a cargo of natural wood. ("When you're entirely recovered, yes," Afreyt said.) The Mouser's men had gone to work as fisherman hosed by Pshawri, and had been able to feed both crews and sometimes have a small surplus left to sell. Strangely, or perhaps not so, the monster catches made during the great run had all spoiled, despite their salting-down, and gone stinking bad, worse than dead jellyfish, and had had to be burned. (Cif said, "I told you Khakhki magicked that run—and so they were phantom fish in some sense, tainted by his touch, no

matter how solid-seeming.") She and Afreyt had sold *Sprite* to Rill and Hilsa for a tidy sum; the two professionals' adventure on *Flotsam*, amazingly, had given them a taste for the sea-life and they were now making a living as fisherwomen, though not above turning a trick at their old trade in off hours. Hilsa was out night-fishing this very evening with Mother Grum. Even the foe had fallen on hard times. Two of the three foreraging Sea-Mingol galleys that had rowed off south had put into Salthaven three weeks later in great distress, having been battered about by storms and then becalmed, after having fled off ill-provisioned. The crew of one had been reduced to eating their sacred how-stallion, while that of the other had so far lost their fanatic pride along with their madness that they had sold theirs to "Mayor" Bomar, who wanted to be the first Rime Isle man (or "foreigner") to own a horse, but succeeded only in breaking his neck on his first attempt to ride it. (Pshawri commented, "He was—*about* omen—a somewhat overweening man. He tried to take away from me command of *Seahawk*.")

Groniger claimed that Rime Isle, meaning the council chiefly, was as badly off as anyone. The bluff harbor master, seemingly more hardheaded and skeptical than ever for his one experience of enchantment and the supernatural, made a point of taking a very hard line with Afreyt and Cif and a very dim view of the latter's irregular disbursements from the Rime treasury in the isle's defense. (Actually he was their best friend on the council, but he had his crustiness to maintain.) "And then there's the Gold Cube of Square-Dealing," he reminded her acerbically, "gone forever!" She smiled. Afreyt served them hot galveh, an innovation in Rimeland, for they'd decided to make an early evening of it what with tomorrow's sailing.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Skor said. "Working around the Beach of Bleached Bones you get the feeling that everything washes ashore there, eventually."

"Or we could dive for it," Pshawri proposed.

"What?—and get Loki-cinder back with it?" the Mouser asked, chuckling. He looked toward Groniger. "Then you'd still be a cloudy-headed god's-man, you old atheist!"

"That's as may be," the Isler retorted. "Afreyt said I was a troll-giant for a space, too. But here I am."

"I doubt you'd find it, dove you never so deep," Fafhrd averred softly, his gaze on the leather stall covering his still handaged stump. "I think Loki-cinder vanished out of Nehwon-world entire, and many another curious thing with it—the queller (after it had done its work) that had become his home (Gods love gold) and Odin-ghost and some of his appurtenances"

Rill, beside him, touched the stall with her burnt hand which had been almost as long as his stump in healing. It had created a certain sympathy between them.

"You'll wear a hook on it?" she asked.

He nodded. "Or a socket for various tools, utensils, and instruments. There are possibilities."

Old Ourph said, sipping his steaming galveh, "It was strange how closely the two gods were linked, so that when one departed, the other went."

"When Cif and I first found them, we thought they were one," Afreyt told him.

"We saved their lives," Cif asserted. "We were very good hosts, on the whole, to both of them." She caught Rill's eye, who smiled.

"When you save a suicide, you take upon yourself responsibilities," Afreyt said, her eyes drifting toward Fafhrd's stump. "If on his next attempt, he takes others with him, it's your doing."

"You're gloomy tonight, Lady Afreyt," the Mouser suggested, "and reason too curiously. When you set out in that mood there's no end to the places you can go, eh, Fafhrd? We set out to be captains, and seem in process of becoming merchants. What next? Bankers?—or pirates?"

"As much as you like of either," Cif told him meaningly, "as long as you remember the council holds Pshawri and your men here, hostage for you."

"As mine will be for me, when I seek that timber," Fafhrd said. "The pines at Ool Plerms are very green and tall."



THE MEDIA SCENE

(Continued from P. 34)

dialogue, and music have all received criticism. In general, I preferred the earlier version. The monster in the remake is obviously a sympathetic character from the beginning instead of earning the viewer's sympathy as he did in the earlier one. The dialogue is wooden, but the special effects are spectacular. The sheer cost of the monster makes it imperative that a sequel be made as quickly as possible. I hope it's better than this one. The official behind-the-scenes book of the movie, *The Creation of Dino De Laurentis' King Kong* by Bruce Bahrenburg (Pocket Books \$1.75), has some interesting photos and background on the construction of Kong. The rest of the book reads too much like studio handouts. The reissue of the original novelization, *King Kong* by Delos W. Lovelace (Ace \$1.95), is for nostalgia buffs only.

There has been no new information on the *Star Trek* movie in quite a while and, although I may be proven wrong by the time this column appears, I have doubts it will ever be made. There have been mumbblings, but no official word, from the studio about script problems, problems with signing the original stars, and other casting problems. To satisfy the many *Star Trek* fans, the movie has to keep pretty close to the original in characterization, psychology, and format. On the other hand, the actors, techniques, etc. are ten years out of date and may not satisfy a wider, more sophisticated movie audience. Translating a forty-eight-minute TV format

to feature length has always proved difficult. It might be easier to make a new *Star Trek* TV series than a successful movie. The ultimate reference book on the original series, *Star Trek Concordance*, edited by Bjo Trimble (Ballantine \$6.95), has finally appeared in a regular trade edition. It has complete information on the regular three seasons plus the cartoon series. If you're a *Star Trek* fan, don't miss it.

Two other semi-fantasy TV series of the past which had strong followings and became cult classics like *Star Trek* may soon be back on the air. *The New Avengers*, starring Patrick Macnee of the original series and Joanna Lumley in the role made famous by Diana Rigg, opened on British TV this past October. ABC, which showed the original eighty-three episodes in the early sixties, is said to be interested in showing the new series as well. The new series, produced by an independent European company, is now filming its second set of thirteen episodes.

The Man From U.N.C.L.E. is being revived by MGM for NBC. The two-hour pilot, written by Richard Maibaum, will probably star Robert Vaughn and David McCallum, the original U.N.C.L.E. agents, in slightly different roles.

Logan's Run is scheduled to become a TV series. William F. Nolan, co-author of the original book, is doing the pilot and follow-up script for MGM. The show will appear on CBS.

Gene Roddenberry is producing a two-hour TV horror movie for NBC called *Spectre*, from his own original screenplay.

The Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films has announced its awards for 1976 movies. The winners were: *Logan's Run*—Best Science Fiction Film, *The Holes*—Best Fantasy Film, and *Burnt Offerings*—Best Horror Film. There was also a special award for *King Kong*. The Best Actor award was a tie between David Bowie for *The Man Who Fell To Earth* and Gregory Peck for *The Omen*. The Best Actress award was won by Blythe Danner for *Futureworld*. The Best Supporting Actor award was given to Jay Robinson for *Train Ride To Hollywood* and Best Supporting Actress was Bette Davis in *Burnt Offerings*.

Personally, I found *The Man Who Fell To Earth* more interesting and cohesive than *Logan's Run*, despite the massive cuts apparently made in the film.

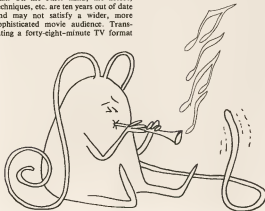
Pieces of *Star Wars* have been previewed in San Francisco and have been very well received. The movie should open in June 1977.

A Fan's Notes

(Continued from P. 35)

So it has gone since at least the 1930s, a situation which I believe is unique and which was forcefully brought to my attention by *Hell's Cartographers*. That is, the cross-fertilization which exists between fandom and pro-dom in the science fiction field. The fans of yesterday became the pros of today who in turn encourage the fans of today to become the pros of tomorrow. Ted White edits two magazines. Terry Carr, Bob Silverberg and Damon Knight each edit an original anthology series, and have all been receptive to the work of fans turned fledgling pros. Furthermore, by their very existence, these writers and the others who have "come up from the ranks" stand as examples.

It is true that in the last fifteen or so years there have been relatively fewer instances of fans successfully making the transition but it does still happen. Witness the Haldemans: Joe and Jay, the sons of a fanfannish mother, who were active in Washington, D.C. area fandom. Both married women they had met in fandom and both embarked upon writing careers. Jay, who writes as Jack C. Haldeman III, is steadily building a fine reputation as a solid, skillful short story writer. Last year Joe won the



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Nebula and Hugo awards for his novel *The Forever War*. F. M. Busby, from Washington (the state), is a fan of many years standing who only recently began writing professionally, to significant acclaim. And Tom Reamy, who was the 1976 winner of the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer, was editing *Trumpet*, an award winning fanzine, over ten years ago.

To reiterate, I think this process is a healthy one and one that is completely individual to the science fiction genre. In no other field that I know of is there such free communication among those who are readers, those who are writers, and those who are editors. And in no other field are these roles so fluid. A fan can, if he is sufficiently talented, become a writer or editor with relative ease. Conversely an editor or writer, who has gotten into the field as a job assignment, for instance, can easily become fan. This is, I think, what has been happening more frequently of late. (It probably has something to do with not wanting to have to explain constantly what you do for a living.) Thus, Gardner Dozois has ties with some of Philadelphia fandom; Andy Offutt is most comfortable among his fan friends

at small Midwest and Southern conventions; George R.R. Martin relates strongly to a fan group based more-or-less in Illinois; and Larry Niven is just one of the members of the L.A. Science Fiction Society. The wives of the last three named gentlemen, by the way, are now or in the past have been very active fans.

It is the recognition of these wild possibilities that is a part of what makes fandom so interesting and exciting to me. *Hell's Cartographers* freshened my awareness of this. (Aldiss indicates that the volume may be just the first of a series. I hope this proves to be true.) It led me to reread *All Our Yesterdays*, *A Wealth of Fable* and *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*. I would recommend them to anyone interested in discovering the way we were—and are.

Hell's Cartographers, ed. Brian Aldiss & Harry Harrison, Harper & Row; 1975, \$7.95.

All Our Yesterdays, Harry Warner, Advent: Publishers, P.O. Box 9228, Chicago, IL 60690; 1969, cloth: \$7.50, paper: \$2.95.



A Wealth of Fable, Harry Warner, Fanhistorica Press, Joe Siclari, P.O. Box 1343, Radio City Station, New York, NY 10019, \$8.00 plus \$7.50 postage and handling.

The Eighth Stage of Fandom, Robert Bloch, Advent: Publishers, P.O. Box 9228, Chicago, IL 60690, 1962, out of print.

(Continued from P. 40)

object. I'd like to see the science articles (which I think are imperative for a really fine SF magazine) pitched at a slightly higher level, in two directions: greater lucidity, and general interest of topic. And there is so much in Raylyn Moore's *Strix* I admire, it's a shame to see it marred by prose like, "Because Caulie was making her journey out of season, she found the oxford little better than a river of thick, early spring mud . . ." Why not, "Caulie was making her journey out of season. The road was a river of early spring mud." I used to teach a remedial reading class, and the omission of such excess verbiage is the difference between enjoyment and despair among new, eager, and sensitive readers.

At any rate, in the fifteen years I have been making my living in science fiction, I can't think of an SF venture I've watched begin that has left me with more excitement. We're all on pins and needles for what comes next.

Best wishes,

Samuel R. Delany

To The Editor:

Since this is your first issue I would like to make a few general comments on the magazine as a whole before saying anything about the individual stories. First, I am pleased to see that you are publishing in a larger format than the current standard for the SF field. Since *Vertex* and *Odyssey* preceded you in this it is not a ground-breaking move but it is good to see that newer magazines do not feel compelled to imitate what is already available but are willing to attempt something radically different. The extra space available, combined with the type of binding that allows the magazine to open flat and the occasional use of glossier stock, allows the use of color-printed interior illustrations which are a welcome change from the standard small black-and-whites seen in the digests . . . These features also provide an opportunity to experiment with interesting layouts with large drawings or more than one small drawing on a two page spread. The crowning glory is, of

course, the centerspread painting by Paul Lehr—a magnificent example of his striking style. I hope that the full-color centerspread will be a standard feature of the magazine. Although it is not stated anywhere, I assume that the Lehr piece is an original since I don't recognize it and if it had been on a book cover I'm sure I would remember it.

Speaking of interesting layout ideas, I like the idea of grouping all the editorials and columns in the center of the magazine. Since I don't always read all the fiction in a magazine but usually read all the features it is convenient as well . . . This next point is more of a personal peeve than anything else but since you came almost all the way to my idea of perfection, I think I will mention it. I have always disliked flipping back and forth in a magazine in order to finish reading a story or an article and in this issue I was gratified to note that only the first story had a note reading, "Continued on . . ." As I said, almost perfect. Keep up the good work.

I have read a number of editorials by Ted White in *Amazing* and *Fantastic* in the last few years on the subject of newsstand distribution. Since I got this copy at an SF bookstore and have not seen it on the stands anywhere in New York, I was wondering if you are having the same type of problems that he talks about. If so, you have my sympathies and I wish you good luck in finding a distributor. It's hard to be successful and sell enough copies to stay in business if nobody knows about you because you are invisible.

I always find it difficult to say anything original and worthwhile about stories, but you have managed to get good stories from some of my favorite authors so I will try to find something to say. I am surprised that Fritz Leiber gets such a modest mention on the cover. The publication of a new *Fahrrad* and *The Gray Mouser* novel should merit a banner headline of approximately the same size as the magazine title. Michael Bishop is one of the very best new writers that I have noticed in the last few years and "The House of Compassionate Sharers" should be a contender for all the awards. The title is a bit restrained for him however. It does not even come close to that of his novel for oddity (i.e. *And Strange Art Ecstasy The Trees*). I have to confess that I haven't read all the rest of the stories yet but I did enjoy the Niven short shots and I am looking forward to the Benford. I see more of Benford than I used to but I would like to see even more—he is very good. Fred Pohl is almost in a class by himself. After all of the great things that he has done in the last thirty years or so it is inspiring to see him getting better and better with almost every new story he writes. Old SF writers don't fade away, their talents go nova.

Well that's about all I have to say about your first issue. I am looking forward to the next one.

John Douglas



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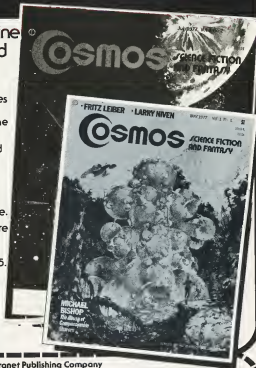
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